

MAKING IDOLS LEGIBLE: NARRATIVE LABOR IN K-POP FANFICTION

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Abstract Before K-pop fanfiction tells stories about idols, it teaches fandom how to read them. This article examines that work as narrative labor, the collective transformation of public idol materials into shared conventions of character, relation, and affect. Rather than treating fanfiction as a derivative extension of official content, it asks how fans make idol personae legible through names, gestures, bodily signs, pairings, and recurrent scenes. Drawing on official and paratextual materials and a curated corpus of approximately 1,350 K-pop fanfiction texts, the study combines computational text analysis with interpretive reading. The analysis shows that fanfiction does not simply reflect idol images. It reorganizes them into relational scripts and affective archives that structure recognition, intimacy, hierarchy, desire, and memory. By reframing K-pop fanfiction as an affective infrastructure of legibility, the article contributes to K-pop studies, fanfiction studies, and digital humanities. It also offers an account of fan narrative labor before generative AI became a normalized condition of cultural production, clarifying what platform and AI systems encounter, simulate, or reorganize.

Keywords: K-pop fanfiction, narrative labor, legibility, relational scripts, affective archives

1. INTRODUCTION

Before K-pop fanfiction tells stories about idols, it teaches fandom how to read them. Songs, performances, interviews, images, livestreams, variety shows, and platform messages provide fragments of idol visibility, but these fragments do not become narrative resources on their own. Fans name, repeat, compare, archive, and narrate them until they acquire recognizable value within fandom. This article examines that process as narrative labor. Rather than asking how fanfiction extends official idol content, it asks how fan writing organizes names, bodies, relations, and affects into forms that fandom can interpret, circulate, and inhabit.

This shift requires a different account of idol culture. K-pop has often been discussed through transnational circulation, digital media, participatory fandom, and platform economies. Such approaches remain indispensable for understanding how K-pop moves across languages, markets, and communities. Jung and Shim's account of social distribution, for instance, shows

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how K-pop circulation emerges through the interaction of grassroots fan practices and corporate strategies (Jung and Shim 2014). Yet circulation alone does not explain how idols become narratable figures. A performance clip may circulate widely, a stage moment may be translated and archived, and a platform message may be received as intimate access. None of these acts, by itself, explains how a name, gesture, role, or bodily description becomes meaningful within fan writing. The question is not only how K-pop moves, but how its dispersed signs become available for narrative use.

The term legibility is central to this argument. Legibility does not mean transparency, nor does it imply that fanfiction reveals the true self of an idol. It refers to the cultural process through which an idol becomes readable within a shared interpretive system. A stage name may carry public authority, while a birth name may signal intimacy, vulnerability, or access. A bodily detail may become a shorthand for character, role, or affective disposition. A pairing may stabilize a relation of dependence, protection, rivalry, or desire. Fanfiction makes idols legible not by uncovering hidden truth, but by producing conventions through which fans can read and rewrite mediated personae.

This process is what the article calls narrative labor. Narrative labor names the work through which fans transform dispersed idol materials into meaningful patterns. It selects from an abundance of public signs, intensifies minor details into markers of character and relation, assigns roles and emotional positions, and archives conventions so that later texts can draw on them without explaining them anew. It also manages ambivalence, since the same sign may enable intimacy, desire, humor, hierarchy, or discomfort depending on its narrative placement. Narrative labor is therefore not simply writing. It is the broader cultural work through which fandom produces the conditions under which idols become readable.

This argument builds on foundational work in fan studies while redirecting it toward the problem of legibility. Jenkins's account of textual poaching remains important because it identifies fans as active producers of meaning rather than passive consumers of media texts (Jenkins 1992). Busse's account of fanfiction as a literary, social, affective, and ethical practice is also crucial because it refuses to separate fan creativity from the community norms and moral ambiguities through which it is produced (Busse 2017). De Kosnik's work on fan archives further clarifies how fan communities create alternative systems of cultural memory (De Kosnik 2016). This article draws on these insights but asks a more specific question: how does K-pop fanfiction make real public figures narratively available without reducing them either to fictional characters or to transparent biographical subjects?

The specificity of K-pop fanfiction lies in this unstable position. Unlike fan writing based only on fictional characters, idol fanfiction fictionalizes public figures whose names, bodies, voices, and images are attached to living performers. This gives the genre both its force and its ethical difficulty. K-pop fanfiction is not reducible to fantasy, devotion, or transgression. It continually negotiates the boundary between public persona and imagined interiority, between collective interpretation and objectification, and between affective attachment and the fictionalization of real bodies. Precisely because of this instability, it offers a privileged site for examining how fandom produces legibility from mediated visibility.

This problem has become more urgent in the platform and AI environment of the 2020s. Kpop fandom is increasingly shaped by proprietary platforms, paid messaging services, algorithmic visibility, and artificial intelligence. Recent work on Bubble shows how fan

platforms commodify relational labor by turning the appearance of intimate communication into a structured interface of artist and fan interaction (Lee and Prey 2025). Research on Weverse likewise argues that platform infrastructures manage economic and affective bonds between performers and audiences, domesticating fan community within corporate technological systems (Bollmer and Tillerson 2025). Fan studies has also begun to address how generative AI unsettles authorship, creativity, ownership, privacy, and exploitation in fandom (Black and Jacobs 2025). These developments make it necessary to understand how fan communities organized interpretive meaning before platformized and AI mediated systems became more explicit conditions of fan participation.

This article is related to, but distinct from, our previous study of Shinhwa and EXO as contrasting cases of K-pop idol IP, generational storyworld formation, and the interplay between official and fan-produced narratives (Lyu, Lee, and Chung 2025). The present article uses the same corpus to ask a different theoretical question. It does not foreground Shinhwa and EXO as generational cases of idol storyworld development. Instead, it examines how Kpop fanfiction makes idols narratively legible through names, bodily signs, pairings, affective repetition, and the ethical conditions of real person fandom.

Drawing on official and paratextual materials alongside a curated corpus of approximately 1,350 fanfiction texts, the study combines computational text analysis with interpretive reading. Computational methods identify recurrent lexical, relational, and affective patterns, including name usage, bodily references, role distribution, co-occurrence relations, and cluster tendencies. Interpretive reading then situates these patterns within systems of meaning shared by fandom communities. The aim is not to claim that computation can exhaust fanfiction's cultural significance, but to locate patterns that require humanistic interpretation, especially when those patterns concern desire, embodiment, intimacy, and ethical ambivalence.

The study asks three questions. First, how does K-pop fanfiction transform public idol materials into legible narrative resources? Second, what textual patterns organize idols through names, gestures, bodily signs, relational roles, and affective attachments? Third, how does fanfiction function as narrative labor before platformized and AI mediated systems began to reorganize fan creativity more explicitly?

The article makes three contributions. Conceptually, it reframes K-pop fanfiction as narrative labor rather than derivative writing. Methodologically, it shows how computational pattern finding and close cultural interpretation can illuminate fanfiction without reducing it to quantifiable features. Historically and ethically, it offers an account of fan narrative labor before the fuller normalization of AI mediated fandom, clarifying how fan communities built the interpretive conditions through which idol culture could be felt, remembered, and rewritten.

2. FANFICTION, LEGIBILITY, AND NARRATIVE LABOR

This section develops the conceptual framework for reading K-pop fanfiction as narrative labor. It brings fanfiction studies into conversation with legibility, affect, relationality, and real person fandom. The central claim is that fanfiction does more than continue existing media texts. It produces conventions through which figures, relations, and affects become available for further narration. In K-pop fanfiction, this work is especially complex because idols are

public performers encountered through images, performances, names, voices, gestures, and fragments of mediated intimacy. Fanfiction turns those fragments into a grammar of character, relation, desire, and memory.

2.1 Fanfiction and the Problem of Legibility

Fanfiction studies begins from the recognition that fans are active producers of meaning. Jenkins's account of "textual poaching" remains foundational because it refuses the idea that fans simply receive media texts in the form intended by producers (Jenkins 1992). Fans select, rearrange, intensify, and redirect the materials they inherit. Fiske's account of the cultural economy of fandom similarly shows that fan practices generate forms of value not reducible to official cultural hierarchies or commercial exchange (Fiske 1992). These early accounts remain important because they establish fan activity as interpretive and productive rather than merely receptive.

Yet the language of poaching, transformation, or expansion does not fully explain what fanfiction does before it rewrites. Fanfiction must first make its materials readable. It must establish which details matter, which names carry force, which relations invite repetition, and which gestures can become signs. This is the problem of legibility. Legibility does not refer to factual access, psychological transparency, or the discovery of an authentic self behind public representation. It refers to the production of shared interpretive conventions. A figure becomes legible when a community has learned how to read recurring signs and attach them to recognizable narrative possibilities.

In many media fandoms, legibility is built around fictional characters whose narrative worlds already provide structures of character, plot, and relation. K-pop fanfiction begins from a less stable object. Its materials are scattered across performances, concept images, music videos, interviews, variety shows, livestreams, social media, and platform communication. These materials produce visibility, but visibility is not the same as legibility. An idol may be seen, circulated, clipped, translated, and archived without yet becoming narratively usable. Fanfiction intervenes at this point. It gives public signs a grammar.

Hellekson and Busse's account of fan communities is useful here because it emphasizes that fanfiction is shaped by shared expectations, reciprocal reading practices, and communal forms of authorship (Hellekson and Busse 2006). Busse further argues that fanfiction is a literary and social practice embedded in norms, pleasures, obligations, and ethical negotiations (Busse 2017). These insights clarify why legibility is never produced by an individual text alone. A single story may introduce an interpretation, but it becomes legible only when it can be recognized, repeated, modified, or contested by others. Legibility is therefore communal. It is produced across stories, tags, pairings, naming habits, affective tones, and recurrent scenes.

Gray's work on paratexts further helps to explain why K-pop fanfiction requires this framework (Gray 2010). In contemporary media culture, meaning is shaped not only by primary texts but also by surrounding materials that frame how audiences encounter and interpret them. K-pop intensifies this condition. The idol is constructed through a dense field of paratextual signs, from teaser images and album concepts to backstage clips and platform messages. Fanfiction does not simply continue these materials. It reorganizes them into narrative. A nickname may become an index of intimacy. A stage gesture may become evidence of longing or restraint. A bodily description may signal vulnerability, authority, desirability, or

distance. A pairing may stabilize a relation before any specific plot begins.

This process is neither fixed nor innocent. The same sign can carry different meanings across different stories. A birth name may signal tenderness in one text and exposure in another. A gesture of care may become protection, dependency, domination, or irony depending on its narrative placement. Legibility does not eliminate ambiguity. It gives ambiguity a recognizable field in which it can be used. Fanfiction communities do not produce one stable meaning for each idol sign. They produce conventions that make multiple readings possible.

The ethical stakes are sharper in K-pop fanfiction because its figures are real public performers. Fanfiction based on fictional characters reworks beings that already exist as textual or audiovisual constructs. Idol fanfiction fictionalizes mediated personae attached to living bodies, careers, names, and voices. It therefore makes public figures narratively available while never fully separating the fictionalized idol from the performer. This is why K-pop fanfiction cannot be understood only as creative participation or as transgressive fantasy. It is a practice in which interpretation, attachment, pleasure, and ethical risk are bound together.

Legibility, then, specifies what narrative labor means in this study. Fanfiction does not merely add stories to idol culture. It produces the conditions through which idol signs can become story materials at all. This grammar is neither wholly authored by the entertainment industry nor freely invented by fans. It emerges from the encounter between managed idol visibility and the interpretive labor of fandom.

2.2 Affect, Relationality, and Real-Person Fandom

If legibility explains how idol signs become readable, affect explains why they matter. Fanfiction does not organize names, gestures, bodies, and relations as neutral textual elements. It gives them emotional force. A name may become intimate because it appears in a scene of care. A gesture may become memorable because it is repeated as evidence of longing, restraint, rivalry, or dependence. A bodily detail may become meaningful because it is attached to vulnerability, authority, desirability, or distance. In K-pop fanfiction, signs become legible because they become affectively charged.

Fan studies has long understood fandom as an affective formation rather than a simple matter of taste or consumption. Grossberg argues that fandom is organized through investments that give cultural objects intensity and value (Grossberg 1992). Hills likewise emphasizes that fan attachment is lived, defended, and negotiated within communities (Hills 2002). Ahmed's account of emotion as a form of cultural circulation is useful here because it shows how feelings attach to signs, bodies, and histories through repetition (Ahmed 2004). K-pop fanfiction can be read in these terms. It is a practice in which emotion circulates through names, roles, gestures, scenes, and pairings until they become recognizable within fandom.

Relationality is the principal form this affect takes. K-pop fanfiction rarely makes idols legible as isolated individuals. It makes them readable through relations of care, rivalry, protection, jealousy, dependence, secrecy, distance, and desire. Pairing is therefore not merely a romantic preference. It is a narrative device that organizes expectation. A pairing tells readers what kinds of tension, attachment, and transformation may become possible before the plot fully unfolds. Through such relational patterns, idol personae become narratively usable.

The concept of parasocial interaction helps explain the mediated intimacy on which K-pop fandom depends, but it does not fully account for fanfiction. Horton and Wohl describe how mass media creates the impression of intimacy between audiences and performers (Horton and Wohl 1956). K-pop intensifies this condition through livestreams, behind the scenes content, fan communication platforms, and repeated forms of address. Fanfiction, however, does not simply reproduce a relation between fan and idol. It scripts imagined relations among idols and invites readers to inhabit those relations affectively. The reader is drawn not only toward an idol, but into a structure of intimacy, conflict, and desire.

This relational structure also makes fanfiction an affective archive. De Kosnik argues that fan archives function as alternative systems of cultural memory (De Kosnik 2016). In K-pop fanfiction, the archive is not only a repository of stories. It is also a repository of affective habits. Recurrent roles, pairings, bodily descriptions, and emotional scenes preserve ways of feeling about idols. They allow later texts to activate meanings already sedimented within fandom. A protective role, a vulnerable posture, or a repeated form of address may become recognizable because fan writing has archived it as an affective possibility.

The ethical stakes of this process become sharper in real person fandom. Busse's work on celebrity and internet performance shows that real person fanfiction operates where public persona, mediated performance, and fictional possibility cannot be clearly separated (Busse 2006). Popova likewise emphasizes how real person fiction works through star image and intertextuality rather than through direct access to actual individuals (Popova 2017). Fathallah argues that real person fiction should be understood as a digital form shaped by online contexts, interfaces, and reading practices (Fathallah 2018). These studies clarify why K-pop fanfiction should not be treated as transparent fantasy about real people. It works with mediated personae already produced through performance, publicity, and circulation.

K-pop makes this tension especially acute because idols are marketed through managed visibility that often appears as intimacy. Fanfiction does not invent this mediation. It intensifies and reorganizes it. It may create space for communal imagination, queer possibility, affective repair, and alternative memory. It may also objectify performers or make real bodies overly available to fantasy. For this reason, this article approaches K-pop fanfiction neither as emancipatory creativity nor as ethically suspect fantasy alone. Its significance lies in the tension between the two. It makes idols legible by organizing affective relations, but that legibility is never innocent.

3. DATA AND METHODS

This study combines computational text analysis with interpretive reading to examine how K-pop fanfiction makes idols legible. Its methodological premise is that patterns of naming, embodiment, relation, and affect can be identified through textual recurrence, but cannot be explained by frequency, salience, or clustering alone. Computational procedures are therefore used to locate patterns that require cultural interpretation. The analysis moves between corpus level regularities and close reading of the narrative functions those regularities acquire within fandom.

3.1 Corpus and Analytical Procedure

The study draws on a curated corpus of approximately 1,350 K-pop fanfiction texts: roughly 450 texts associated with an early idol fandom corpus and roughly 900 texts associated with a conceptually dense idol fandom corpus. The two corpora correspond to historically distinct formations of idol fandom, represented here by Shinhwa and EXO respectively. These materials were used in a previous study by the authors to examine K-pop idol IP, generational shifts in storyworld formation, and the interaction between official and fan-produced narratives (Lyu, Lee, and Chung 2025). The present article uses the same corpus to ask a different theoretical question. Rather than foregrounding Shinhwa and EXO as generational cases of idol storyworld development, it examines how fanfiction makes idols narratively legible through names, stage names and birth names, bodily signs, pairings, relational scripts, affective repetition, and the ethical ambivalence of real person fandom.

The two corpora are treated not as representative generations, but as contrastive conditions of idol legibility. The first corpus allows us to examine fan writing in relation to idol personae shaped by performance, broadcast appearances, interpersonal familiarity, and interpretation based on member relations. The second corpus allows us to examine fan writing in relation to a more densely conceptualized idol environment, where visual design, symbolic motifs, album concepts, and narrative fragments provided a heightened field of interpretive cues. In both cases, the unit of analysis is not the idol group as an industrial object, but the fanfiction text as a site where public idol materials are reorganized into readable narrative forms.

The corpus was constructed from fanfiction texts that circulated in online fan communities and were selected according to relevance to the two focal fandoms, textual completeness, and suitability for computational analysis. Fragmentary, inaccessible, duplicated, or technically unsuitable texts were excluded. The final corpus was organized into two subcorpora corresponding to the two case formations. Metadata were limited to information necessary for corpus management and interpretation, including group affiliation, title or internal identifier, and text category where available. Because the purpose of this study is not to evaluate individual authors or reconstruct community histories at the level of identifiable users, the analysis treats texts as cultural documents rather than as personal data attached to named fan writers.

The analytical procedure consisted of three stages. The first stage involved preprocessing and normalization. Texts were cleaned to remove technical noise, repeated formatting markers, and elements outside narrative that interfered with textual analysis. Proper names, stage names, birth names, group names, and recurrent pairing terms were reviewed separately because their interpretive value cannot be reduced to ordinary lexical frequency. In K-pop fanfiction, a name is not merely a referential label. It may signal public identity, intimacy, hierarchy, role position, or affective proximity. For this reason, name related forms were retained as meaningful units rather than treated as removable noise.

The second stage involved computational text analysis. Frequency analysis was used to identify recurrent lexical items and semantic domains across the corpus. TF-IDF was used to locate terms that were particularly salient within each subcorpus rather than merely frequent across the whole dataset. Co-occurrence analysis examined how names, bodily references, affective expressions, and relational terms clustered around one another. Where appropriate, association measures were used to distinguish meaningful co-occurrence patterns from simple

frequency effects. Dimensionality reduction and clustering techniques were then used to explore broader distributions of narrative tendency. These procedures were not designed to produce a definitive taxonomy of fanfiction. They were used to identify recurrent patterns that could guide interpretive analysis.

The third stage involved interpretive reading. Computational results were examined in relation to selected textual passages and recurring narrative situations. This stage focused on how statistically visible patterns became meaningful within fanfiction. The recurrence of a name form, for example, was interpreted in relation to whether it marked public performance, private intimacy, emotional exposure, or relational hierarchy. Bodily references were read not simply as descriptions of appearance, but as signs that could organize vulnerability, desire, authority, distance, or care. Pairings and relational terms were interpreted as scripts that structured expectations before plot development unfolded. Affective vocabulary was examined in relation to narrative scenes, since terms of longing, pain, comfort, fear, or attachment gain meaning through their placement within relations. This combined procedure avoids treating fanfiction either as isolated examples for close reading or as computational output that explains itself. Its value lies in the movement between pattern and interpretation: frequency, salience, co-occurrence, and clustering show where fanfiction organizes attention, while interpretive reading explains how such repetitions become narrative labor.

The analysis that follows is organized around three interpretive axes. The first concerns names, gestures, and bodily signs as devices of legibility. The second concerns relational scripts and affective archives as ways of organizing intimacy, hierarchy, and memory. The third concerns fanfiction as narrative labor before the fuller normalization of generative AI and platform systems that increasingly structure contemporary fandom. Together, these axes allow the article to examine how K-pop fanfiction turns mediated idol visibility into forms that can be read, desired, remembered, and rewritten.

3.2 Ethics and Limitation

The corpus used in this study consists of fanfiction texts, not interviews, surveys, or private communications. Nevertheless, the ethical issues involved are substantial. K-pop fanfiction is a form of real person fiction, and its narrative materials are attached to living performers whose names, bodies, voices, and public images circulate within commercial and affective media systems. The analysis therefore does not treat the corpus as transparent evidence about actual idols, fan authors, or fan communities. It treats the texts as cultural documents that reveal how fandom organizes legibility, relation, and affect. No claim is made about the private lives, intentions, or identities of the performers who become narrativized in the corpus.

The study also avoids treating online availability as equivalent to unrestricted ethical use. Internet research ethics has repeatedly emphasized that public accessibility does not remove the need to consider context, vulnerability, traceability, and possible harm (Markham and Buchanan 2012; Franzke et al. 2020). This is especially important for fanfiction, where texts may circulate in public or partially restricted spaces while still being understood by participants as belonging to specific communities of readership. For this reason, the analysis does not identify individual fan writers, reproduce usernames, provide URLs, or use searchable metadata that would make specific texts easily traceable. When examples are discussed, they are treated primarily at the level of pattern, paraphrase, and interpretive function rather than as extractive quotation.

A second ethical concern involves the performers themselves. Real person fanfiction occupies a difficult space between public persona and imagined interiority. As Busse argues, fanfiction cannot be separated from the social and ethical conditions under which it is produced (Busse 2017). Fathallah similarly stresses that real person fiction should be read in relation to digital contexts and practices rather than as simple fantasy about actual individuals (Fathallah 2018). In this study, idol names and bodily references are analyzed only as textual and cultural signs within fan writing. They are not interpreted as evidence of actual relationships, actual desires, or authentic selfhood. This distinction is central to the study's ethical position. The article examines how fanfiction makes idols narratively available while acknowledging that such availability is never ethically neutral.

The study has several limitations. First, the corpus is not intended to represent K-pop fanfiction as a whole. It is composed of approximately 1,350 texts associated with two historically distinct fandom formations. These materials are useful for examining contrasting conditions of idol legibility, but they cannot account for all genres, platforms, languages, fandoms, or historical moments within K-pop fan writing. The corpus is shaped by availability, preservation, access, and the survival of online texts. Deleted works, private communities, restricted archives, and platform based forms of circulation are necessarily underrepresented.

Second, the computational procedures used here are exploratory rather than exhaustive. Frequency, TF-IDF, co-occurrence, and clustering can reveal recurrent textual patterns, but they cannot explain cultural meaning by themselves. Name variation, nicknames, spacing conventions, romanization, fandom slang, genre markers, and shifts in platform language all affect the results of computational analysis. Proper names and pairing terms are especially difficult because they function both as lexical items and as dense cultural signs. The study therefore treats computational results as prompts for interpretation, not as autonomous evidence.

Third, the study does not claim to reconstruct authorial intention or reader reception. It analyzes textual conventions and recurring patterns, not the motives of individual writers or the experiences of individual readers. Nor does it claim that narrative labor before generative AI was free from technological mediation. K-pop fandom has long been shaped by digital platforms, search systems, archives, interfaces, and commercial infrastructures. The phrase "before generative AI" is used in a narrower sense. It refers to a period before the broader normalization of automated fanlike writing and AI assisted cultural production. The purpose is not to idealize an earlier fandom, but to identify the interpretive labor that later platform systems and systems mediated by AI encounter, reorganize, and potentially appropriate.

These ethical and methodological limits shape the scope of the argument. The article does not offer a total history of K-pop fanfiction, nor does it claim to define fan desire in general. It offers a focused account of how selected fanfiction corpora organize names, bodily signs, relations, and affects into shared forms of legibility. Its contribution lies in showing how fanfiction can be studied as cultural pattern and interpretive practice while remaining attentive to the ethical ambivalence of real person fandom.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis examines how K-pop fanfiction turns mediated idol visibility into narrative resources. Rather than treating the two corpora as a simple contrast between earlier and later idol generations, this section asks how fan writing repeatedly organizes names, gestures, bodies, relations, and affects into forms that become recognizable within fandom. The examples discussed below are not direct quotations from individual stories. They synthesize recurring patterns identified through corpus based analysis and interpretive reading. This approach makes it possible to discuss legibility cues without exposing individual fan texts or treating isolated passages as representative of the corpus as a whole.

4.1 Names, Gestures, and Bodily Signs

The most immediate form of legibility in K-pop fanfiction is produced through signs that appear small but carry substantial narrative force. Names, gestures, and bodily descriptions do not merely identify figures or decorate scenes. They regulate access to idol personae. They tell readers whether a scene belongs to public performance or private intimacy, whether a relation is distant or emotionally charged, and whether a figure should be read through authority, vulnerability, desire, restraint, or care. Fanfiction makes idols legible by repeatedly assigning narrative value to these signs.

Table 1 Example of Legibility Cues in K-pop Fanfiction

Pattern	Example keywords and expressions	Narrative function
Name Shifts from Public Identity to Intimacy	stage name, birth name, nickname, full name, pairing name	Marks shifts between public persona, private access, familiarity, distance, and emotional exposure
Minor Acts of Care	adjust a collar, offer water, wait in silence, cover with a jacket, touch a wrist, notice an injury	Makes care legible without explicit confession or explanatory dialogue
Bodily Signs of Vulnerability and Restraint	tired eyes, lowered head, tense shoulders, trembling hand, controlled posture, quiet voice, unsteady breathing	Turns bodily description into signs of vulnerability, authority, desire, exhaustion, or emotional restraint
Scenes of Legibility	public schedule, practice, performance, makeup, fatigue, private room, waiting quietly	Combines names, gestures, and bodily signs into scenes where readers infer intimacy, care, conflict, or desire

Table 1 identifies four recurrent types of legibility cues. These cues should not be read as isolated motifs. They become meaningful because fanfiction repeatedly attaches them to recognizable scenes, relations, and affects. A ‘stage name’ or ‘birth name’ matters because it regulates distance. An act such as ‘offering water’ matters because it can make care visible without direct confession. A phrase such as ‘tired eyes’ matters because it places the body within a relation of recognition, concern, or desire.

Names are central because K-pop idols are mediated through multiple systems of naming. A performer may appear through a ‘stage name,’ ‘birth name,’ ‘nickname,’ ‘full name,’ or ‘pairing name.’ These forms do not function as interchangeable labels. In scenes associated with ‘performance,’ ‘rehearsal,’ ‘interview,’ or ‘public schedule,’ a ‘stage name’ often keeps the idol close to public identity and group image. In scenes of ‘fatigue,’ ‘confession,’ ‘care,’ or ‘private conversation,’ a shift to a ‘birth name’ or ‘nickname’ can produce emotional proximity.

The change in naming changes the reader's access to the figure. It moves the idol from public visibility toward narrative intimacy.

This pattern appears across both subcorpora, though it draws force from different sources. In the early idol fandom corpus, naming often relies on member familiarity, group history, and personality images already sedimented in fandom memory. In the conceptually dense corpus, names operate in a field where stage identity, visual concept, and narrative role may overlap. The aim is not to establish fixed historical types, but to show how names become legible through different mixtures of performance, persona, and fandom interpretation.

Gestures perform a related function. K-pop is a culture of highly circulated movement, from choreography and interviews to variety shows, fan clips, livestreams, and platform content. Fanfiction selects from this field of visible movement and gives gestures narrative intention. A 'glance' may become hesitation. A 'hand on a shoulder' may become protection. 'Silence' may become refusal or care. A 'smile' may become concealment. What matters is not whether the gesture reveals an authentic private self, but how fan writing makes it interpretable.

Minor acts of care are especially important because they allow fanfiction to encode affect without explicit declaration. In scenes following 'practice,' 'performance,' or 'public schedule,' one character may be described as 'exhausted,' 'injured,' or 'withdrawn.' Rather than declaring concern directly, the caring figure may 'adjust a collar,' 'offer water,' 'wait in silence,' 'cover the other with a jacket,' or 'touch a wrist.' Such gestures carry the affect that dialogue withholds. They make care legible through action rather than explanation. Conversely, the refusal of a habitual gesture can mark 'conflict,' 'jealousy,' 'fear,' or 'unresolved desire.' Both gesture and withheld gesture become narrative evidence.

Bodily signs are the most ethically charged form of legibility. K-pop fanfiction frequently uses physical description, but description does not function only as visual detail. Expressions such as 'tired eyes,' 'lowered head,' 'tense shoulders,' 'trembling hand,' 'controlled posture,' 'quiet voice,' or 'unsteady breathing' assign affective position. Their meaning depends on where they appear, who notices them, and what relation they activate. 'Tired eyes' may position a character as someone who requires recognition or protection. 'Controlled posture' may mark authority or emotional distance. 'Trembling hand' may suggest fear, desire, or suppressed confession.

This point is important because bodily description can easily be reduced to the consumption of idol appearance. It is certainly tied to visibility, desire, and the risk of objectification. Yet it also performs narrative work. Desire, care, rivalry, hurt, and dependence often become readable through physical details before they become explicit in dialogue or plot. The body becomes a site where affective interpretation and ethical ambivalence meet.

Names, gestures, and bodily signs rarely operate separately. They combine to form scenes of legibility. A typical scene may begin after a 'public schedule' or 'performance,' when a character returns still marked by 'clothing,' 'makeup,' 'posture,' or 'fatigue.' Another character notices a detail that others overlook. The narration shifts from a 'stage name' to a 'birth name' or 'nickname.' A small gesture follows, such as 'offering water,' 'touching a wrist,' or 'waiting quietly.' Little may happen at the level of plot, but the scene becomes dense with meaning. It establishes who sees whom, who is permitted to care, who is vulnerable, and what kind of relation the reader should anticipate.

The analysis of names, gestures, and bodily signs demonstrates the first major form of narrative labor in K-pop fanfiction. Fan writing creates the conditions under which mediated idol figures become narratable. It teaches readers how to move from public image to intimate sign, from visible gesture to emotional evidence, and from bodily description to affective expectation. Before fanfiction can organize larger relational scripts, it must first make its figures readable.

4.2 Relational Scripts and Affective Archives

If names, gestures, and bodily signs make idols initially readable, relational scripts organize what readers are expected to do with that readability. K-pop fanfiction rarely presents idols as isolated figures. It places them within repeated patterns of care, rivalry, dependence, secrecy, protection, jealousy, and desire. These patterns do not simply describe interpersonal relations. They teach readers how a relation should be anticipated, felt, and remembered. In this sense, relational scripts are a second level of narrative labor. They gather individual legibility cues into recurring structures of affect.

Table 2 Examples of Relational Scripts and Affective Archives in K-pop Fanfiction

Pattern	Example keywords and expressions	Narrative function
Care and Protection Scripts	waits outside, covers with a jacket, notices first, takes home, stays awake, keeps silent	Turns intimacy into acts of attention, protection, and emotional responsibility
Rivalry and Hierarchy Scripts	leader, younger member, older member, competition, anger, distance, command	Organizes relations through authority, role difference, discipline, jealousy, or unresolved dependence
Desire and Restraint Scripts	almost touches, looks away, holds back, cannot say, too close, silence	Makes desire legible through delay, refusal, hesitation, and withheld confession
Affective Archive of Repetition	again, as always, the same room, that name, that look, remembered	Preserves repeated scenes, roles, and emotional habits as fandom memory

Table 2 summarizes the relational patterns most relevant to the present argument. These examples synthesize repeated tendencies observed across the corpus. Their significance lies not in any single phrase, but in the way similar phrases and situations recur until they become recognizable conventions. A reader familiar with the fandom does not need a long explanation to understand why ‘waits outside’ may indicate care, why ‘looks away’ may signal restraint, or why ‘as always’ may activate memory. Repetition produces expectation.

One of the most visible relational scripts in the corpus is care. Care appears through small acts of attention rather than through explicit emotional declaration. One character ‘waits outside,’ ‘notices first,’ ‘takes home,’ ‘stays awake,’ or ‘keeps silent’ in order to protect another character’s vulnerability. The force of these acts lies in their indirectness. Care becomes legible because it is shown through attention to bodily condition, fatigue, silence, or emotional withdrawal.

This script matters because it transforms idol visibility into relational responsibility. A tired body or quiet gesture becomes meaningful when another character recognizes it. The relation is built through asymmetry: one figure is seen, while another figure becomes the one who sees.

This structure allows fanfiction to organize intimacy without necessarily naming it as romance. Care may be protective, fraternal, romantic, possessive, or quietly dependent. Its ambiguity is part of its narrative power. It allows a scene to remain emotionally dense even when the plot does not make the relation explicit.

In the early idol fandom corpus, care scripts often draw on member familiarity and group based intimacy. Their affective force depends on the assumption that readers already understand habitual roles, public personalities, and long term interpersonal histories. In the conceptually dense corpus, care may be attached to more symbolic environments, where protection can be linked to secrecy, danger, power, or destiny. In both cases, care functions less as a theme than as a narrative grammar. It tells readers who is allowed to notice, who is allowed to intervene, and whose vulnerability becomes narratively meaningful.

Relational scripts are not limited to tenderness. The corpus also organizes idol legibility through rivalry, hierarchy, and role difference. Terms such as 'leader,' 'younger member,' 'older member,' 'competition,' 'anger,' 'distance,' and 'command' indicate that relations are often structured by position. A character may be written as responsible because of age or role. Another may be written as rebellious, dependent, resentful, or in need of recognition. These scripts turn group structure into narrative tension.

Hierarchy gives relation an immediate shape. A leader can command, protect, fail, or carry responsibility. A younger member can resist, seek recognition, or become vulnerable. A rival can mirror desire through conflict. Such roles do not simply reproduce official group positions. Fanfiction reassigns them as emotional functions. Authority may become care. Discipline may become longing. Anger may become evidence of attachment. Distance may become the sign that a relation matters. A role becomes a script when it can be repeated across stories and still remain recognizable.

Desire in K-pop fanfiction is often organized through restraint rather than direct expression. The corpus repeatedly uses phrases and situations such as 'almost touches,' 'looks away,' 'holds back,' 'cannot say,' 'too close,' and 'silence.' These signs make desire readable by delaying it. A character does not confess, but fails to move away. A hand almost touches but stops. A look lasts too long. A name is withheld. The relation becomes legible through what does not happen.

This script shows how fanfiction produces affect through narrative withholding. Desire is not only represented through explicit scenes. It is built through hesitation, interruption, and deferred recognition. Restraint allows fanfiction to maintain tension between public image and private affect. It also allows readers to participate in interpretation. Because desire remains partially unstated, readers are invited to read signs, infer meanings, and anticipate future disclosure.

The ethical ambivalence of real person fandom is especially visible here. Restraint can create narrative subtlety, queer possibility, and emotional intensity. It can also make real public bodies available to fantasies of hidden desire. The point is not to resolve this tension by declaring the practice either liberating or problematic. The point is to recognize that relational scripts work through this tension. They turn mediated figures into narratable subjects while never fully detaching those figures from living performers.

Relational scripts become affective archives when they are repeated across texts. De

Kosnik's account of fan archives as alternative cultural memory helps clarify this process (De Kosnik 2016). In K-pop fanfiction, the archive is not only a storehouse of stories but also a storehouse of relational habits. Expressions such as 'again,' 'as always,' 'the same room,' 'that name,' 'that look,' and 'remembered' indicate accumulated recognition. A scene matters because it recalls earlier scenes. A gesture matters because it has been felt before. A role matters because it has already carried affective weight in other texts. In this sense, fanfiction preserves not only content but also ways of feeling. It remembers relational forms.

The analysis of relational scripts shows that K-pop fanfiction does more than make idol figures individually legible. It makes relations legible as repeatable forms of affect. Names, gestures, and bodily signs become meaningful because they enter patterns of care, rivalry, hierarchy, desire, and memory. These patterns are not simply borrowed from official content, nor are they purely invented by individual writers. They emerge through the collective narrative labor of fandom. Fanfiction becomes an affective archive because it preserves the relational grammar through which idols can be read, desired, remembered, and rewritten.

4.3 Narrative Labor before Generative AI and Platformized Fandom

The preceding sections have shown that K-pop fanfiction makes idols legible through names, bodily signs, gestures, relational scripts, and affective archives. This finding also gives the corpus historical significance. The texts examined in this article belong to a period before generative AI became a normalized condition of fan cultural production. This does not mean that they stand outside technology. K-pop fandom has long depended on digital platforms, online archives, search systems, translation networks, image circulation, and commercial media infrastructures. The point is more precise. Before AI systems could produce fanlike prose at scale, fanfiction communities had already developed the interpretive grammar through which idols became narratively available.

This distinction matters because current discussions of AI and fanfiction often begin with the question of textual production. Can AI generate fanfiction? Can it imitate fan voice? Can it produce plausible plots, pairings, and emotional scenes? Such questions are useful but limited. They treat fanfiction primarily as output. The analysis in this article suggests that fanfiction should instead be understood as labor: the collective work of deciding which names, gestures, bodily signs, relations, and affects can become meaningful within fandom. What generative AI may imitate is therefore not only style or plot, but the appearance of fandom legibility itself.

K-pop platforms make this shift especially visible. Recent research on Bubble shows how the platform commodifies artists' relational labor by turning the appearance of intimate communication into an interface, messaging system, and industrial arrangement (Lee and Prey 2025). Work on Weverse likewise argues that platform infrastructures manage economic and affective bonds between performers and audiences, organizing fan community within corporate technological systems (Bollmer and Tillerson 2025). These studies are not about fanfiction directly, but they clarify the changing environment in which fan writing now circulates. Intimacy is no longer produced only through interpretation, circulation, and communal writing. It is increasingly formatted, priced, recommended, and managed.

Fanfiction precedes and complicates this platform logic. Long before paid messaging services formalized the appearance of personal access, fan writing had already transformed mediated visibility into scenes of care, vulnerability, restraint, and desire. A private name, a

delayed confession, a protective gesture, or a repeated scene of exhaustion and recognition created forms of intimacy that were not simply supplied by the industry. They were produced through narrative labor. Platform systems relocate part of this labor into interface design and monetized communication, while fanfiction produces intimacy through interpretive arrangement.

Generative AI extends this problem in another direction. Black and Jacobs argue that AI is disrupting fan studies debates around ownership, legality, the fannish gift economy, and creativity (Black and Jacobs 2025). For K-pop fanfiction, these questions are especially charged because the genre already fictionalizes mediated personae attached to living performers. If a generative model can produce a plausible story using familiar pairings, care scripts, restrained desire, and bodily signs of vulnerability, what exactly has been automated? Not merely prose. Not merely narrative form. What is being automated is a recognizable grammar of affective interpretation that fandom communities have built over time.

This does not mean that AI assisted fan creativity should be dismissed in advance. Fan cultures have always adapted new media technologies. The issue is how labor, agency, and value are redistributed when the conventions of fan interpretation become available to automation. If fanfiction is understood only as content, AI appears as a more efficient producer of similar content. If it is understood as narrative labor, AI raises a deeper question: what happens when the work of making idols readable can be simulated without belonging to the community that developed its grammar?

The corpus analyzed here therefore functions as more than an archive of earlier fan writing. It records a form of fan labor that precedes its possible automation. Names, gestures, bodies, pairings, care scripts, and affective memories show how fandom created legibility before generative systems entered the scene as cultural producers. These patterns may later be captured, recombined, or standardized by platforms and AI systems, but their meaning cannot be reduced to technical reproducibility. Their force depends on context, memory, disagreement, repetition, and shared recognition.

The significance of narrative labor before generative AI lies in what it reveals about the present. Platform and AI systems do not create fandom legibility from nothing. They encounter an existing grammar of affective interpretation. K-pop fanfiction shows how that grammar was built through communal acts of reading and writing: public images became intimate signs, relations became scripts, and repeated feelings became archives. The task for humanities and digital humanities research is to ask how this grammar is preserved, appropriated, standardized, or transformed when fan creativity becomes increasingly mediated by platforms and generative technologies.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that K-pop fanfiction should be understood not as a secondary extension of idol content, but as narrative labor through which fandom makes idols legible. The central question has not been whether fanfiction adds stories to existing idol media, nor whether it faithfully reflects official images. Rather, the article has examined how fan writing turns names, gestures, bodily signs, relations, and affects into shared systems of narrative

meaning. To make idols legible is not to make them fully knowable. It is to produce a grammar through which mediated figures can be read, desired, remembered, and rewritten within fandom.

The analysis has shown that this grammar operates at several levels. First, names, gestures, and bodily signs function as cues of access. A shift from a 'stage name' to a 'birth name,' a minor act such as 'offering water,' or a bodily phrase such as 'tired eyes' becomes meaningful because fanfiction repeatedly attaches such cues to scenes of intimacy, restraint, vulnerability, and care. These signs do not carry stable meanings in isolation. They acquire force through their placement within recognizable situations and relations. Fanfiction thus converts public idol visibility into narrative availability.

Second, the article has shown that these cues become more powerful when organized into relational scripts. K-pop fanfiction rarely makes idols legible as isolated individuals. It makes them readable through relations of care, rivalry, hierarchy, dependence, secrecy, protection, and desire. These scripts allow readers to anticipate affect before plot fully explains it. A gesture of care, a role difference, a withheld confession, or a repeated scene of recognition can become legible because similar forms have appeared across other stories. In this sense, fanfiction does not only represent affect. It preserves and reorganizes it. It functions as an affective archive in which fandom stores ways of feeling, reading, and remembering mediated figures.

Third, the article has situated this narrative labor in relation to the changing conditions of platformized and AI mediated fandom. The corpus examined here records a form of fan labor before generative AI became a normalized tool of cultural production. This does not imply a technologically innocent past. K-pop fandom has long depended on digital platforms, archives, search systems, translation practices, image circulation, and commercial media infrastructures. Yet before AI systems could generate fanlike prose at scale, fan communities had already built complex conventions for making idols narratively available. What generative systems may now imitate is therefore not simply plot or style, but the appearance of fandom legibility itself.

This finding has implications for K-pop studies, fanfiction studies, and digital humanities. For K-pop studies, the article shifts attention from circulation alone to interpretation. K-pop does not become culturally meaningful only because it moves across markets, platforms, and languages. It becomes meaningful because fans transform dispersed media signs into narratable forms. For fanfiction studies, the article extends discussions of participatory authorship, real-person fiction, and affective fandom by foregrounding legibility as a specific form of fan labor. For digital humanities, the article demonstrates the value of combining computational text analysis with interpretive reading. Frequency, salience, co-occurrence, and clustering can identify recurring patterns, but they cannot explain why those patterns matter. Their meaning emerges only when textual repetition is read in relation to fandom practice, affective convention, and ethical ambivalence.

The ethical stakes of this argument are important. K-pop fanfiction works with public personae attached to living performers. Its narrative labor can create spaces of communal imagination, queer possibility, affective repair, and alternative memory. It can also objectify performers, stabilize intrusive fantasies, or make real bodies overly available to narrative use. The article has therefore avoided treating fanfiction either as inherently liberating or as simply problematic. Its significance lies in the tension between creativity and risk. Fanfiction makes idols legible, but this legibility is never innocent.

The study also has limits. The corpus does not represent all K-pop fanfiction, all platforms, all languages, or all fandom histories. The two subcorpora offer contrasting conditions of idol legibility, but they cannot stand for the entire field. The computational procedures used here are exploratory, and the analysis does not reconstruct authorial intention or reader reception. Future research could expand the corpus across platforms, languages, gender formations, and later fandoms shaped more explicitly by paid messaging services and generative AI tools. It could also examine how readers themselves understand the ethical boundaries of writing and consuming real-person fanfiction.

Despite these limits, the article has shown that K-pop fanfiction deserves attention as a site where fandom's interpretive labor becomes visible. Fanfiction does not merely tell alternative stories about idols. It builds the conditions under which idols can become storyable in the first place. Public images become intimate signs. Relations become scripts. Repeated feelings become archives. By tracing this process, the article reframes K-pop fanfiction as an affective infrastructure of fandom, one that clarifies how cultural meaning is produced before, alongside, and now increasingly within the technological conditions of platformized and AI mediated media culture.

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