International Journal of Communication 10(2016), 1563–1580 1932–8036/20160005

Co-mmodifying the Gay Body: Globalization, the Film Industry, and Female Prosumers in the Contemporary Korean Mediascape

JUNGMIN KWON[1]
University of Portland, USA

Gay people are now easy to find in Korean popular culture. Although increased representation of the gay body in media is encouraging, the current version of commodification raises questions. Why did Korean mainstream media decide to commodify gay sexuality despite the unfavorable public sentiment toward gay people in Korea? Who does the industry aim to reach, and what are the roles of the target audience in the commodification process of gay bodies? This article points to the liberalization and Hollywoodization of the Korean film industry and its active co-optation of local young female fandom for gay media commodities. Furthermore, it underlines how the commodification of the gay identity in Korean media is an ongoing process and cultural phenomenon in which female fans continue to participate.

Keywords: commodification, globalization, Korean film, film industry, young women, fanfic

In this era of global trade, the commodification process is pervasive. Even sexual orientation is not immune to this process: Flourishing markets for LGBT commodities are establishing themselves in some regions of the world. This is true of the media market in South Korea (hereafter Korea), a society where sexual minorities have long been ignored. Previously, Korean mainstream media representation reflected this culture-wide heterosexism: LGBT populations were rarely portrayed in Korean popular culture before the mid-2000s. However, the release of *King and the Clown* (*Wangui Namja*) in 2005, a historical fiction about a complicated relationship among three men, marked a turning point for LGBT media commodities in the Korean mainstream market. A megahit, *King and the Clown* contributed to lessening concerns about including gay characters in film production. The movie was followed by other media genres, including television dramas, reality shows, and stage musicals. Since then, gay media commodities have become much easier to find in Korean mainstream media, even though reality remains harsh for the minority citizens in Korea.

Jungmin Kwon: kwon@up.edu
Date submitted: 2014–08–07

[1] This article is a revised version of one chapter from the author's doctoral dissertation. The book manuscript based on the dissertation, tentatively titled *FANtasy Changes the World: Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Imagination*, is currently under contract with the University of Iowa Press. The author would like to thank the *International Journal of Communication* and the University of Iowa Press for allowing cross-publication.

Copyright © 2016 (Jungmin Kwon). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at http://ijoc.org.

The increased representation of the gay body in Korean mainstream media is encouraging; however, the current version of commodification of the gay identity and culture raises questions from the perspective of critical/cultural media and communication studies. First, how did *King and the Clown* achieve market success and influence other media to commodify homosexuality despite the unfavorable public sentiment toward LGBT people? In what social context did the film industry decide to take a risk? Second, we need to identify the de facto targeted consumers of gay commodities in the mainstream media. It is unlikely to be gay spectators, who typically prefer not to consume gay-themed media in public for fear of being publicly outed. Who does the industry aim to reach, and what are these consumers' roles in the commodification process?

This article suggests that untangling these issues should start by replacing our classic understanding of consumption with prosumption. Second, it examines the transformation and restructuring of the Korean film industry since the late 1980s. More specifically, I point to the liberalization and Hollywoodization of the Korean film industry and its active co-optation of young Korean women's long-standing fandom for gay eroticism. Furthermore, I emphasize how the commodification of homosexuality in Korean media is not a foregone outcome of industrial interests but an ongoing process and cultural phenomenon in which targeted consumers continue to participate. I map out these phenomena by reconceptualizing commodification in a way that reflects the changing status of consumers.

Retheorizing the Commodification of Culture

In *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx defined a commodity as "an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another" (1887/2010, p. 26). The notion of a commodity was fundamental in Marx's work in explaining the development of a capitalist society. Even in this postmodern age, commodification processes remain one of the pivotal preconditions for capitalism (Prodnik, 2012). But while Marx's version of the concept remains valid in many ways, his conceptualization is limited for contemporary application, because he saw commodities only as a specific class of products. Indeed, the idea of the commodity has since been critically interpreted and widely expanded. Prodnik (2012) argued that "the current phase of commodification goes much further . . . ; it starts to erode and change almost all human contacts and relations" (p. 298). Literally everything is being commodified: Sacred relics, babies, sex, the eggs of female models, human organs, and freedom have all been valorized and traded (Ertman & Williams, 2005; Sassatelli, 2007).

With "commodification having spread into all areas of life" (Prodnik, 2012, p. 297), we have become so accustomed to the market's appropriation of our social practices that we are desensitized even to the commodification of our identities and, correspondingly, of our cultures. This process of commodification is undertaken by a system of production and has a close relationship with communication and technology. Drawing on Marx, scholars such as Fuchs (2011) have argued that communication and technology are efficient tools for producing and circulating commodities that help minimize costs and maximize profits. Though Fuchs hit the mark on how pivotal communication is for the commodification process, his argument's scope does not include the ongoing dynamic relationship between commodification and communication. Communication and its technologies are not just tools; they influence the general process of commodification, such as processes of production, distribution, and sales,

which in turn permeate other communication processes and institutions (Mosco, 2009; Prodnik, 2012). In optimizing and transforming the process of producing, distributing, and selling commodities, advertising and mass media companies play an important role in translating human values into commodities. With vast resources for visualizing, textualizing, and glamorizing, the communication and technology industries are quite successful at representing, creating, and manipulating our desires.

Acknowledging that commodification prevails in society and that business sectors appropriate our cultures, identities, and desires in the process does not mean, however, that commodification is always reproachable. Nor does it mean that the process of commodification is unilateral—that is, from producers to consumers, as Marx claimed. Radin (2005) defined commodities in a manner similar to Marx's definition but refutes the Marxian understanding that commodification is always wrong and cannot coincide with noncommodified social interactions. Building upon the work of Arjun Appadurai (1986/2005), who argued that commodities are political, Radin and Sunder (2005) redirected the concerns of commodification from "the appropriation of cultural forms and knowledge by outsiders" to "a strategy for both economic and cultural growth" by claiming that "cultural control requires some market control" (p. 19). This is because commodities, rather unintentionally, bolster the constitution and solidification of identity and social relation at times.

Two significant examples of this argument can be found in Ertman and Williams' (2005) edited collection on reconceptualizing commodification. Austin (2005) discussed Kwanzaa, an African American cultural celebration observed at the end of each year, and Chasin (2005) demonstrated the U.S. market ascendance of the gay and lesbian movement in the 1990s. Both examples prove that the commodification of cultures can help marginalized identities gather and, in some cases, contribute to their political activism. Those behind marketization arguments might not have anticipated such positive effects. In a nutshell, commodification has diverse meanings and impacts, and it dissimilarly works according to context. This pliability means that commodification itself is affected by various conditions and is never a one-way process. In the same vein, Sassatelli (2007) claimed that commodities are not unilaterally influenced by a single state-sponsored ideology, as has been argued by the Frankfurt School and certain strains of leftist American radicalism. Rather, she asserted that consumption should be understood as an active and creative practice. In this sense, consumption is also a form of production.

Appadurai (1986/2005) pointed out that commodification "lies at the complex intersection of temporal, cultural and social factors" (p. 38). Echoing Appadurai and established theories of commercialization, this article conceptualizes commodification as a cyclical process in which both producers and consumers interact and are influential. Thus, the following developments may occur: An entity is incorporated into a market; some consumers adopt it while others, in some cases, resist; and a market explores such resistance to find any novelty that can be merchandised. These stages occur constantly; they affect and interanimate one another, and they overlap and take place simultaneously. From this, it can be theorized that young female fans of gay-themed media do not simply remain passive consumers even after the commodification of their subculture. Instead, they become "prosumers" in the process of commodification and contribute to building up both mainstream culture and subcultures. In his book *The Third Wave*, futurist writer Alvin Toffler introduced the term *prosumer*. He anticipated a digital revolution and defined a prosumer as the "progressive blurring of the line that separates producer from

consumer" (1980, p. 267). A prosumer suggests the do-it-yourself dimension of contemporary popular culture in which consumers write blogs, make films, publish content, and comment in discussion threads, hence flattening the sphere of cultural production. In contemporary culture, large numbers of prosumers actively and critically engage in the process of commodity consumption, production, distribution, and circulation. As prosumers, female fans of gay media contribute to and disrupt the commodification process of nonstraight identities in Korea.

The prosumer practices of the women across dominant and alternative cultural sectors remind us of the notion of "queer relay." Henderson (2008) defined queer relay as "an ongoing, uneven process of cultural passing off, catching and passing on" that envisions "a historical braid of changing production conditions and the virtual hunger of commercial systems for subcultural energy and artistry" (p. 571). Queer relay admits reciprocality of various agents in commercial cultural production that appropriate and redirect one another traversing the spaces of capital and subversion—that is, the commodification process. The commodifying process of the gay body in Korea exemplifies what queer relay conveys to us: Culture is a result of what many interweave together, and thus "commodified culture is culture" (Radin & Sunder, 2005, p. 21).

The Korean Film Industry in the Global System

Since the 1990s, Korean political leaders have actively embraced the ideology of globalization and pushed forward the reorganization of the Korean media industry in a way that has promoted deregulation, liberalization, and privatization (Jin, 2011). Meanwhile, the Korean government became cognizant of the potential and significance of the culture industry. A story recounted by Shim (2002) is illustrative of the atmosphere at the time. In 1994, a report from the Presidential Advisory Board on Science and Technology equated the worldwide revenue from Hollywood's *Jurassic Park* to 1.5 million Hyundai car sales, fundamentally contending that one film could earn more than the export of Hyundai cars over a period of two years (Shim, 2002). Historically, the development of the Korean economy was export-led, and Korean political leaders worried most about the revenue-generating manufactured goods that essentially fed Korean citizens and sustained the domestic economy. The 1994 report convinced administrators of the potential of cultural products to attract foreign money. Consequently, the government used the report to justify its investment in the media industry and to expedite the development of "the high value-added audiovisual industry (*yeongsangsaneop*) as the national strategic industry for the 21st century" (Shim, 2002, p. 340). The Korean administration strongly supported conglomerates by offering benefits such as tax breaks and loose regulations to rapidly produce films of a quality that could deliver *Jurassic Park*–sized revenues.

The film industry deserves special attention, because the Korean government considered it one of the core areas in cultural industry and expedited its development as a high value-added audiovisual industry. Being influenced by the wave of globalization, political leaders found it crucial to liberate economic systems from the strong hands of the government. Therefore, the authorities aggressively pursued trade agreements with foreign countries and eased the governmental regulation of cinema. As a result, the doors to the domestic market opened. However, the governmental scenario—the stimulation of Korea's film industry and the subsequent production of exportable films—did not go as planned. As soon

as restrictions on importing movies were lifted, the dominance of Hollywood intensified; its theatrical market share was 53% in 1987 and rose to 80% in 1994 (Park, 2007; Shim, 2002). This was because the Korean film industry had not had any grace period or shock absorber before fully opening the market to foreign industry. Previously, only Korean film companies could import and distribute global movies. The United States used Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 to suppress Korean markets open to film along with consumer goods and financial products (Jin, 2011). To protect the manufacturing sector that the export policy concentrated on, the Korean government had to accept the demand, thereby allowing foreign distributors to pour into the local film market. Thus, in terms of the number of films, Korea became the second-largest importer of Hollywood films in the world in the mid-1990s (Lim, 1997).

As the domestic film industry withered, Korea implemented policies favorable to native media conglomerates, hoping to revitalize the domestic market and compete with the dominance of Hollywood films in the country (W. Ryoo, 2008). First, the screen quota system was reaffirmed as "the core of such protectionist measures" (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2008, p. 335). The quota system is legislation that requires theaters to play domestic films for a certain number of screening days each year. Moreover, several government-backed film festivals were held to promote Korean films to foreign buyers. For instance, the Pusan International Film Festival, held annually since 1996, was supported and funded with the goal of making it "the Mecca of the Asian film market." Among the policy measures, boosting the participation of existing conglomerates in film production garnered the most attention from administrative leaders. The newly legislated Promotion Law for Moving Images provided tax breaks for major film studios. In 1995, according to the law, the government opened the School of Film and Multimedia, the motto of which was "Learning Hollywood . . . to match their size and resources" (Shim, 2004, p. 9). Accordingly, Korean companies adopted the Hollywood-style studio system. These efforts by the Korean government and media conglomerates paid off in the market. The market share of domestic films increased from 16% in 1992 to 46.1% in 2001 (Shim, 2004). Meanwhile, the oligopoly among media giants in the industry intensified, and the competition grew fiercer.

During this time, the Korean film industry experienced a period of structural transformation. First, the United States, which had strongly requested the abolition of the screen quota system, finally made the repeal of the quotas a precondition for any trade deal with Korea (Shin & Stringer, 2007). As a result, the number of days required by the system was reduced by half (from 146 to 73 days) in July 2006. This led to fears of a crisis for the Korean film industry, as major players assumed that Hollywood films would again thrive at the expense of the domestic market. These concerns proved to be valid. Korea's market share gradually declined from 63.9% in 2006 to 49.8% in 2007 and to 42.1% in 2008 (S. Kim, 2011). Second, despite its unstable position in the domestic market, Korean cinema became hugely popular in other countries, especially in Asia. Korean television dramas and popular music found broader fan bases as well. Korean films have been released in Asian countries and have experienced great commercial success, leading some to call Korea's film industry the "new Hong Kong" (Frances, 2007). Korean film studios, aiming at a broader market, have collaborated with foreign companies in Asia and elsewhere and hired Korean actors who are popular in other countries. With the popularity of Korean popular culture, called *Hallyu*, or the "Korean wave," Korean film has spread around the world.

To maintain the booming market in Korea, compete with Hollywood cinema, and satisfy consumer demands from global markets, film producers and marketers began aggressively looking for new material for movies and attempting to vary genres, narratives, and casts. It was at the height of such efforts that *King and the Clown* (2005) took the country by storm. The film's most ardent fan group—young Korean women—caught the attention of film industry professionals.

Media Representation of the Gay Body and Female Fandom in Korea

Even before the film *King and the Clown*, elements of LGBT culture had surfaced sporadically in the Korean mainstream media. The film *Ascetic* (*Geumnyok*), released in 1976, centers on a tragic and erotic love story between two female protagonists. The film *Sabangji* (1988) depicted a true scandal from 1462 that is documented in the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*. It illustrates the love between a widowed noblewoman and her female slave Sabangji, who appears in drag. Clearly, both films focus on homoeroticism; however, they are not popularly recognized as queer cinema. Their "female eroticism" was believed to satisfy only the heterosexual male gaze, because they were produced in the golden age of eroticism in Korean cinema when pornographic movies filled theaters.

Broken Branches (*Naeillo Heureuneun Gang*), directed by Park Jae-ho in 1995, is often considered the first full-fledged queer Korean film. In the movie, Confucian values about homosexuality are challenged by a gay protagonist who introduces his male partner to his family. Many identify *Road Movie* (2002), directed by Kim In-sik, as a more recent but still classic gay-themed Korean film. As the title suggests, it consists of many episodes about two men who go on a road trip and fall in love. Soon after, Chingusai, a gay rights organization, produced *Camellia* (*Dongbaek-kkot*, 2004). This independent movie depicts many difficulties that gay couples confront, such as social discrimination, a failure to maintain romance, and a love triangle. Unfortunately, none of these bold productions experienced commercial success. A similar lack of interest greeted most Korean television dramas about sexual minorities, such as *Sad Temptation* (*Seulpeun Nyuhok*, 1999) and *The Perfect Roommate* (*Wanbyeokan Roommate*, 2004).

In 2005, the success of *King and the Clown* changed the gay media landscape. The film is a work of historical fiction about two men, Gon-gil and Jang-saeng, who were old friends and talented clowns during the Joseon Dynasty. They spoof their king, the famous despot King Yunsan (1476–1506), to gain popularity and earn money. An old retainer of King Yunsan sees their skit and invites them to the palace to use their performance to purge the king's opposition forces. For instance, he asks them to perform at a banquet a farce based on a real story about corrupt officials. The officials at the banquet can't laugh because it is their story, and the king interrogates and punishes the officials. Meanwhile, the king falls in love with Gon-gil, whom Jang Nok-su, the king's most beloved (female) concubine, describes as "more beautiful and girlish than cisgender women." Jang-saeng becomes concerned about Gon-gil's status in the palace and jealous of Gon-gil's relationship with the king. Hence, he persuades Gon-gil to leave the palace with him. However, Gon-gil hesitates about their departure due to his sympathy for King Yunsan. Nok-su devises a scheme to place Gon-gil under false charges of treacherous behaviors, but Jang-saeng claims to be falsely accused instead of Gon-gil. The king tortures Jang-saeng and blinds him. In the end, an armed

uprising against King Yunsan takes place, and the two clowns wistfully perform their last play on a tightrope.

Critics and audiences argued whether *King and the Clown* includes gay themes or is a queer film. Several scenes suggest the homosexual relationship between Gon-gil and King Yunsan and feelings of more than friendship between Gon-gil and Jang-saeng. Nonetheless, some doubt the notion of the gay love triangle, because Gon-gil resembles a transgendered person and thus the emotions of the king and Jang-saeng for Gon-gil are only evoked by his femininity. In Korea, a man who does not have a penis or likes another man is considered to be lacking in masculinity and is thought to be feminine instead. Therefore, if a man performs another gender role against heteronormativity or has a "feminine-looking" appearance, he sometimes becomes the butt of sexual jokes that call him a eunuch or a gay man. That is, a man's femininity is associated with gayness in Korean society. Thus, the gay body is stereotyped as pretty (not handsome), slim, androgynous, and interested in fashion, beauty, caring, and nurturing, which are conventionally considered "women's spaces" in Korea. In this cultural context, some audiences may perceive Gon-gil as a "pseudo-man" closer to a woman and, hence, his relationship with the other male protagonists as closer to heterosexual. At the same time, other spectators identify Gon-gil as a gay man and thus his relationship with Jang-saeng and the king as homosexual. Alexander Doty (1993), who pioneered queer media studies, suggested a queer position and reading through which readers of mass culture have alternative perspectives opposed to intended meanings. In other words, whether a film is a queer one depends on the viewer's perspectives and interpretation. According to this view, audiences have the right to argue that *King and the Clown* has a gay theme and is a queer movie, a perspective with which I fully concur.

Echoing this stance, Kim and Singer (2011), in their periodization of Korean queer cinema, suggested that *King and the Clown* ushered in the "blockbuster" age of queer cinema in Korea, on the heels of the earlier "invisible" and "camouflage" periods. Right after *King and the Clown*'s success, more movies handling LGBT issues were released in the Korean mainstream media market than ever before. Such films included *No Regrets* (*Huhoehaji Ana*, 2006), *Antique* (*Seoyanggoldong Yanggwajajeom Antique*, 2008), *A Frozen Flower* (*Ssanghwajeom*, 2008), and *Hello My Love* (2009), all of which were clear about the gay identities of characters. Several years after *King and the Clown*'s release, a handful of television dramas were produced that feature pseudo-queer characters and present the same convoluted romantic plot: A woman in masculine drag becomes involved with a man who believes she is a man. Examples include *The First Coffee Prince Store* (*Coffee Prince 1 Hojeom*, 2007) and *Seonggyungwan Scandal* (*Seonggyungwan Nyusaengdeurui Nanal*, 2010). The dramas all end with "the rectification of misunderstanding": Her physiological sex is unveiled, and thus their love becomes "normal"—that is, heterosexual.

Through the release of these programs, television seemingly began to flirt with queer plotlines and characters. Television is an inherently more conservative medium than film, because content broadcast over public airwaves needs to appeal to wider populations; films, on the other hand, can court segments of the population, because viewers are charged admission. Therefore, television could not rush to depict LGBT characters, even if its executives knew that gay themes were on the rise in the film market. Television has typically avoided portraying homosexuality as the main subject matter, and gay

characters have rarely played lead roles. The number of dramas that have given more airtime to LGBT stories, however, has steadily increased, with shows such as *Life Is Beautiful* (*Insaengeun Areumdawo*, 2010), *Reply 1997* (*Eungdapara 1997*, 2012), and *The Lover* (2015), all of which featured LGBT characters in main roles.

This increased representation of the gay body in Korean mainstream media since the mid-2000s as well as the success of *King and the Clown* are in debt to local female fandom for gay media spectacles. Women in their teens to 30s have been exposed to various gay texts. Since the 1980s, some of them have consumed homoerotic manga called *yaoi*, or boys' love culture, imported from Japan since the 1980s.[2] Around the late 1990s, U.S. programs with either main or supporting LGBT characters such as *Will and Grace* (1998–2005), *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005), and *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) also gained popularity with Korean female audiences. These women fans not only consume global gay cultural productions but produce their own gay texts sexualizing gay identities. These texts are commonly named "fanfic" (fan fiction), which usually combines the *yaoi* theme with male singing group members in Korea. Both globally circulated and locally created gay cultural texts fantasize and beautify gay people and the eroticism of their relationships. The consumption and production of such gay-themed media has led to an increasing open-mindedness about gay men among younger women. One newspaper even reported that the majority of young Korean women actively want a gay friend (J. Ryoo, 2009).

Western cultures have a similar genre called "slash fiction,"[3] fan-produced homoerotic romance featuring media characters. Many scholars—including Henry Jenkins, Constance Penley, and Camille Bacon-Smith—have researched this genre, focusing particularly on why such texts are popular among heterosexual female fans. They have suggested several explanations, such as discontent with the existing heteronormative romance genre, the pleasure of gazing at two male bodies, the genre's potential as pornography for women, and the novelty resulting from male-to-male relationships that women would never be able to experience. According to researchers who examined Korean fans of gay erotic texts, these are applicable to fans of *yaoi* and fanfics in Korea (M. Kim, 2002). Furthermore, the strongly patriarchal nature of Korean society might function to boost Korean women's desire for the gay body. Korean women may be tired of Korean men who believe a man should be a manly and muscular leader. Instead, they envision a man who is sweet, motherly, and slender. This dreamy man in between a man and a woman is personified as a gay man in the female imagination according to the stereotype about gayness in Korea that I outlined above. Women may then derive enjoyment through creating and manipulating these men in the virtual world. In a sense, the genre is claimed to be subversive and antihegemonic in terms of gender structure (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 1991).

In reality, the female fantasy is incarnated as "flower boys (*kkonminam*) syndrome" in Korean popular culture. Jung (2011) described the syndrome in which pretty, feminine men instead of tough,

---

[2] Zanghellini (2009) defined *yaoi* as "a genre of anime (cartoons), manga (comics) and fan art whose subject matter is erotic and romantic relationships between males" (p. 279).

[3] Slash fiction originated in the 1960s, when fans of *Star Trek*, the popular science fiction television show, tweaked the deep friendship and commitment between Captain Kirk and his first officer Spock. The term *slash* comes from the use of a slash (/) to combine Kirk and Spock, as in *K/S*.

masculine men are idolized. It emerged in the late 1990s in Korea, when soft masculinity was in the limelight due to the destabilization of the boundary between femininity and masculinity. The in-betweenness of flower boys evokes the gay body for Koreans; however, because flower boys are not necessarily gay, women who are less supportive of gay identities can still embrace them. Propelled by the support of female fans/consumers, entertainment sectors hire "pretty-looking" would-be singers and actors to appeal to female eyes. Indeed, members of the most famous male singing groups in Korea are so-called flower boys. Flower boy–looking singers such as TVXQ, Super Junior, and EXO have led the dissemination of K-pop culture. Additionally, popular *Hallyu* (Korean wave) actors across Asia, including Bae Yong-joon, Kim Soo-hyun, and Jang Keun-suk, are also typical flower boys rather than traditionally handsome men. In short, one of the reasons for K-pop's global popularity is the flower boys syndrome and its roots in the female subculture of the gay romantic genre. Bromance, a straightened-out version of gay relationships, is emerging in the Korean mainstream media market. Male protagonists in films such as *Secretly, Greatly* (*Eunmilhage, Widaehage*, 2013) and some celebrities in entertainment shows like *Infinite Challenge* (*Muhandojeon*, 2005–) actively reveal their affection toward other heterosexual men by verbalizing loving feelings or hugging. Female fans passionately welcome the insinuation of homosocial relationships. These are all evidence of the cultural powers wielded by Korean female fans of gay media representation.

Visualizing Valuable Viewers' Needs

Despite decades of history and practices, it was not until the mid-2000s that the female fandom for the gay body was spotlighted in the mainstream media market. The "discovery" of the subculture started in the film market. After the enormous popularity of *King and the Clown*, filmmakers revisited the potential of gay-themed content. During the film's run, it ranked as the top-grossing Korean movie ever released and, as of 2015, remains the ninth-highest-grossing Korean movie according to the Korean Film Council (n.d.). During the film's 112-day run in theaters, more than 10 million people watched it—a massive number for a PG-15 film, considering Korea's population over the age of 15 was about 38 million at the time. The movie was funded and distributed by major Korean film companies and directed by a mainstream producer. Public reception was ecstatic; moviegoers rated the film a 9 on a scale of 10 in the film rating section of the most popular portal website in Korea (Naver Film Rating, n.d.). Indeed, the movie's production values are high enough to attract a diverse audience. Its narrative is relatively robust, and most of its major characters are played by well-known actors.

Although the film's popularity was widespread across genders and ages, what really captured the attention of movie professionals was the scale of fandom among young women. The creator of a cyber community for fans of *King and the Clown* admitted to going to theaters to watch the movie nine times—more than the average member of her online community but not as fanatical as one 23-year-old woman who claimed to have watched the film 45 times (Seo, 2006). Much of young women's fandom can be attributed to the male actor Lee Joon-ki, who starred as Gon-gil, a character portrayed using what are understood in Korea to be gay stereotypes—ambiguously gendered, slim, and pretty. Lee Joon-ki's physical appearance exemplifies the ideal gay character of *yaoi* or fanfic content. Previously unknown but fueled by the overwhelming fandom of young Korean women, Lee Joon-ki became an A-list actor.

With the success of *King and the Clown*, the Korean film industry understood how important these young women were in the mainstream film market. Thanks to this group of fans, it seemed less risky to include LGBT themes. This trajectory is similar to what the U.S. media sector experienced in the 1990s. In his discussion of queer content and valuable viewers in the United States, Peters (2011) claimed, "Commercial and cable broadcasters are concerned with the size of a program's audience *and* the amount of disposable income viewers have to spend. Viewers are hierachically ranked as 'valuable' or not, based on their disposable incomes" (pp. 197–198). Put simply, commercial television is constantly searching for viewers with money to spend. This is why U.S. networks chose to include gay and lesbian characters, first by targeting the young, affluent, straight, and open-minded population and then the high-income LGBT populations.

The commercial success of *King and the Clown* opened the Korean film industry's eyes to the value of gay topics and female fans who are young, straight, and willing to pay for movies with gay characters. The financial power of these women contributed significantly to the change of perspectives within the film industry. In modern Korea, the quality of life and political, economic, and social conditions for women have dramatically improved over the past 50 years. Korean men and women equally receive primary and secondary education, and, recently, female high schoolers who attended college outnumbered their male counterparts. Due to their educational achievements and subsequent job opportunities, more women work and have their own financial resources. According to the Korean Statistical Information Service (n.d.), in 2015, the economic activity rate among women in their 20s was 65.1%, which is slightly higher than that of men (63.7%). This higher rate among women is also due to the mandatory military service required of young men, who usually finish in their 20s; however, it still demonstrates that a considerable number of young Korean women have careers and earn their own money. This generation was born after democratization in the 1980s and grew under the influence of Western individualism and consumerism (Lee, 2005). Thus, the young women tend to prefer enjoying their own lives with disposable incomes to marrying early, and they constitute a significant segment in the consumer market. Korean film professionals identified these women with economic power as valuable viewers and began targeting them. Accordingly, gay themes were less anathematic in mainstream film production.

Indeed, gay themes were hardly a poor choice for the queer-starved Korean film market. Kim and Min (2013) put it this way: "Since 2007, the crisis of the Korean film industry had intensified. Film producers tried to find more provocative film topics. Homosexuality fitted in very well with the need in that it is related to a social taboo and sexuality" (p. 92). Homosexuality was rarely broached in mainstream popular Korean culture, thus remaining relatively novel and eye-grabbing. For cinema producers, LGBT themes seemed to have the potential to attract public attention because they were unconventional and sensational. Changes for sexual minorities in Korean society were also afoot. At the turn of the millennium, two milestone events involving sexual minorities took place in Korea and reached the public sphere. In 2000, male actor Hong Suk-cheon came out, followed a year later by the public presence of Ha Ri-su, a transgender model. The incidents astonished most cisgender, heterosexual Koreans, who had previously been unaware of sexual and gender minorities. Although they did not make Koreans shed their antipathy toward sexual minorities, these two public figures paved the way for the average cisgender Korean to at least recognize the existence of sexual and gender minorities in Korea. Animated by this climate, the Korean mainstream movie industry felt encouraged to include gay

characters in films, aiming at the female fandom for gay media spectacles, which had long been untouched. The industry gradually touched upon topics about gay life and included gay characters, either as protagonists in the main plot or in supporting narrative roles. As the industry expected, the women of their targeted audience did not mind watching a film with gay characters as long as it was of good quality.

The power and importance of women viewers in mainstream gay film production is further demonstrated by considering movies with gay themes from the late 1990s and early 2000s—in other words, before *King and the Clown*. For instance, neither *Broken Branches* (1995) nor *Road Movie* (2002) was a commercial success. These films both depict the harsh realities that gay couples in Korea face today—the inequalities and hardships that they, their families, and their acquaintances experience. Most importantly, they do not have flower boy–type actors. This stands in contrast to the reception of gay-themed movies after *King and the Clown*. Unlike previous cinema portraying gay individuals, subsequent films often started fleshing out the desires and interests of young women for the gay body, describing gay people like characters from *yaoi* or fanfic. The results reached the intended audience and captured female attention. Thanks to this strategy and female fandom, mainstream LGBT-themed films after *King and the Clown*, including *Antique* (2008) and *A Frozen Flower* (2008), were able to find success.

Films including queer characters produced by both mainstream and independent studios continue to be released. The number of films produced per year is not high and may not sound impressive. Yet compared to earlier periods, films with non-heterosexual and non-cisgender elements are indeed on the rise. Other media genres, such as dramas and musicals, have followed this trend. Although not all releases receive substantial public attention, the trend does prove that media directors and marketers are not shying away from LGBT topics on the whole. It may be too hasty to conclude that the trend is revolutionary; however, it is unquestionably a significant improvement in media representations viewed by heterosexual, cisgender consumers in Korea. For perspective, after he came out in 2000, Hong Suk-cheon was shut out of all programs he was currently shooting.

Film professionals have acknowledged that these transitions and the marketability of gay materials are attributable to audiences of young women. Some Korean moviemakers and marketers that have included gay themes in their productions have publicly stated that their work intends to appeal to young female viewers. Kim-Cho Kwang-soo, an openly gay filmmaker, has declared that his target audience is young (and presumably straight) women. After all, gay people often feel discouraged from watching gay-themed cinema in theaters in case other spectators might recognize their sexual identity and ridicule them. I interviewed Kim-Cho in August 24, 2012, right after his film *Two Weddings and a Funeral* (*Dubeonui Gyeolhonsik-gwa Hanbeonui Jangnyesik*, 2012), which includes LGBT themes, had been released.[4] He confirmed that female fans of gay media texts form a significant viewer bloc for his movies. When I asked about the viewing public, he answered,

[4] Kim-Cho reportedly derived the name from his favorite UK/U.S. coproduction film, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994); however, the stories of the two films are dissimilar.

> The viewer group that consumes queer films is very small. [It is] young women who repeatedly watch my movie, and I target them. They are the only group that finds a theater to see my movie. Why would I consider people who wouldn't see my movie?

He indicated that these women are fans of *yaoi*, fanfic, and other types of gay erotic texts and that they fetishize the gay body. At that moment, they were his core group of consumers, so he considered their tastes, although he attempted to depict the social realities of gay individuals rather than reinforcing non-homosexual women's fantasies. Indeed, the films that he has either supervised or created include more stories about the demands of a hostile society than do those produced by heterosexual directors. He cannot erase from his filmmaking the discrimination that he has experienced. However, at the same time, he does not forget to cater to his fan group. For instance, in *Two Weddings and a Funeral*, upon seeing the gay protagonist couple riding a bicycle together, three women grumble, "Very sad. We are single because good men date each other"—"That's what I am saying. *Good men are either married or gay*." This last line is widely used among Korean women when they find themselves adoring gay men or lamenting the deficiency of eligible men around them. Many female viewers of the film no doubt share this view. Kim-Cho confessed that he included this exchange to represent how some heterosexual women in favor of gay identities can nevertheless deride homosexuality. The desiring gaze of the female fan for the gay body looms over the end of the film as well. An animated gay couple kisses in a scene that is directly evocative of *yaoi* drawings. Song Seo-jin, who worked with Kim-Cho as a marketer several years prior, affirmed as much:

> For *No Regret* and *Boy Meets Boy*, which Kim-Cho directed, the audience was mostly female. Female fans were very active in participating in the film meetings and events. Kim-Cho considered the communication with fans as significant, so he held many gatherings with the women. . . . I assume that Kim-Cho knows who the main target of a gay film is, as he has experience in marketing, planning, and directing. . . . Also, the fact that we know they are the important part of our fan body did influence our marketing strategies. (personal communication, 2012, August 22)

This proves that, as valuable viewers, the expectations and interests of fans can make a difference in film production.

A similar consideration for the fans can be found in *Antique*, a story about four men, two of whom are gay, based on the namesake Japanese *yaoi*. A representative from the film production company, Lee You-jin, stated the following in an interview with a newspaper:

> We aimed at young women in their teens and twenties whom we believe are less averse to homosexuality. If homosexuality is untangled not in a heavy and serious but in a bright and cheery way, fans can relate to it. (Ko, 2008, para. 13)

Antique achieved this goal. It was rare to see male moviegoers in theaters for the film; "86% of moviegoers who purchased tickets in advance were female" (H. Kim, 2008, para. 2). In an interview with H. Kim (2008), a moviegoer acknowledged that the film was just "eye candy" for (heterosexual) women

and did not deliver any serious content relating to gay identity. That is, the film straightforwardly appealed to female viewers with pretty-looking leads and romantic stories.

Other gay media genres operate within a similar expectation of female audiences. A Korean showing of the Broadway musical *Thrill Me* cast two flower boy actors to depict a gay relationship; 90% of the audiences were women (Moon, 2010). *Thrill Me*'s Korean counterpart placed more focus on the physical appearance of actors than the original Broadway version did. One of the characters is described as nerdy, small, and ugly in the Broadway version, whereas the Korean production cast tall, slender, and photogenic actors to appeal to female audience members. *Thrill Me* has a strong fan base among young female "shippers,"[5] who repeatedly attend the show to cheer on their favorite pairings.

Almost across the board, younger women are valuable viewers of gay-themed media. Businesses that do not typically cater to LGBT audiences—most Korean film studios—have no problem marketing gay-themed productions because their target market is, ironically, not the LGBT consumer. Put simply, contemporary gay content in Korean mainstream media production is a reflection of female desires and is a commodity through which media corporations make profits.

From Commodification to Co-mmodification

The neoliberal logic of commodification has permeated Korean business, commercializing most cultural domains, subcultures, and, at times, rebellious practices. With the employment of commercial media systems, the subcultural fandom of young women for gay-themed texts became targeted and commodified. However, young women play a continual role, and they are constantly participating in and responding to the commodified subculture even though the industry seems to have led the commodification process. For instance, online fan communities for *No Regret* directed by Kim-Cho, primarily consisting of young female fans, crowd-funded for the film's poor production environment, coproduced a scenario book and a calendar with still images of the film, and posted positive reviews on blogs to promote the film. Eventually, the film topped the box office records for the independent genre. The organizer of one fan community noted, "As the filmmaker or the film gets attention, I conclude that 'we [fans] made it.' We could get familiar with the production team, as it was small-scale. Thus, we felt their job was ours, too" (Kim, Huh, & Kim, 2007, para. 3). The director reciprocated by including fans' commentaries in the DVD version of the film.

In some cases, fanfic writers are officially given the opportunity to participate in mainstream media production with their creations. For example, in 2006, SM Entertainment, one of the biggest entertainment companies in Korea, held two fanfic contests, making it clear that winning pieces would be used in television dramas. Moreover, even after gay-themed movies became mainstream in Korea, women did not stop either consuming or publishing *yaoi* and fanfic texts—they defended their subcultural space, which, if anything, grew as a result of the exposure. They even expanded their territory: They initially included only male singers as protagonists in fan-produced novels but started creating fanfic about the

---

[5] 'Ship' is from relationship. The shippers are fans that enjoy creating or campaigning a romantic pairing between characters of a popular cultural text.

characters in movies and female singers, which was a rare phenomenon in the early 2000s. In short, they remain trendsetters when it comes to producing LGBT texts. Of course, the development of communication technologies helps these prosumers' relay activities.

This latest endeavor to preserve their territory also seems to be in the process of being monetized; media producers, it appears, are always searching for new things to commodify. Just as they incorporate gay material, the cultural industries have recently begun producing and reproducing fantasies about lesbian identities for young female audiences. Contemporary films with lesbian themes include *Tell Me Something* (1999) and *Memento Mori* (*Yeogogoedam II*, 1999). However, lesbian characters in these works are depicted as psychotic killers or ghosts—in terms of genre, these films are either thrillers or horror movies. In contrast, more recent mainstream films and television dramas—including *The Daughters of Club Bilitis* (*Club Bilitis-ui Ttaldeul*, 2011), *Life Is Peachy* (*Changpihae*, 2011), and *Sunam Girls* (2014–2015)—highlight the romantic relationships of lesbian couples. Likewise, some entertainment companies have strategically included gender-ambiguous women in prefabricated female singing groups—consider Amber, a tomboy icon from the girl group f(x).[6] The inclusion of gender-ambiguous women encouraged fans to have lesbian fantasies and to write lesbian fanfic content—all, of course, with the underlying goal to bring more consumer attention to the singing groups (Song, 2009).

Like Henderson, Appadurai (1986/2005) wrote that commodification is cyclical—more "a phase than an innate quality" (p. 35). All the fan and industrial practices around gay and lesbian media representations suggest that female fans, with their technological tools, support such phasic commodification. Their agency in the process is active: They have led the creation of queer-imaginary culture, and they will keep doing so, thereby continuing the queer relay wherein subcultural practices seek unoccupied spaces out of commercial reach and capital systems reterritorialize those spaces.

Conclusion

This article describes the commodification process of the fan culture about gay media texts in contemporary Korean society. The industrial appropriation of the subculture is a complex and multilayered development in which diverse factors at the global, political, economic, and sociocultural levels operate and many groups are involved. In the process, Korean female fans continually maintain and expand their interests in gay media representations as active agents and try to mirror their demands to the industry's commodification of their subculture. In a sense, the commodification of the fan culture appears seamless: Every subject—whether on the industry side or the prosumer side—participates and seems to achieve his or her desired outcomes. But short-term satisfaction with the system does not mean that there are no problematic elements in the commodification of the fan culture. Gay representation in Korean media originated not from gay desire and reality, but from non-gay women's subcultural practices. Ideally, a commodifying process about a specific group of individuals would cater to that group's culture and identity. For instance, Nickelodeon, a U.S. cable company whose target audience is young viewers, must appeal to kids to access the youth market. However, gay-themed Korean mainstream media makes a spectacle of homosexuality for heterosexual female consumers, whose desires the filmmakers and

[6] She affirmed her heterosexuality several times in television shows.

marketers approve of and cater to. In other words, the female subculture against the current gender relations and its mainstreaming veil gay struggles in the real world and may cause gay populations to become more marginalized. Surely, it is meaningful that the fandom contributed to the increasing gay portrayals in mainstream media. However, it remains to be seen whether and how the commodification will bring relevant changes to the lives of members of the Korean LGBT community and whether it will encourage positive attitudes toward them among mainstream society or even influence government policy beyond the popular cultural sector. To achieve meaningful change, the most urgent priority should be to fill in the missing piece in the co-mmodification process: LGBT Koreans themselves. Like the female fans, they need to become prosumers to create content that includes their voices and responds to the depiction of their bodies in media by using diverse communication technologies.

References

Appadurai, A. (2005). Commodities and the politics of value. In M. Ertman & J. C. Williams (Eds.), *Rethinking commodification: Cases and readings in law and culture* (pp. 34–43). New York, NY: New York University Press. (Original work published in 1986)

Austin, R. (2005). Kwanzaa and the commodification of Black culture. In M. Ertman & J. C. Williams (Eds.), *Rethinking commodification: Cases and readings in law and culture* (pp. 178–190). New York, NY: New York University Press.

Bacon-Smith, C. (1992). *Enterprising women: Television, fandom and the creation of popular myth*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Chasin, A. (2005). Selling out: The gay and lesbian movement goes to market. In M. Ertman & J. C. Williams (Eds.), *Rethinking commodification: Cases and readings in law and culture* (pp. 213–220). New York, NY: New York University Press.

Doty, A. (1993). *Making things perfectly queer: Interpreting mass culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Ertman, M., & Williams, J. C. (2005). *Rethinking commodification: Cases and readings in law and culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Frances, G. (Ed.). (2007). Introduction. In *Seoul searching: Culture and identity in contemporary Korean cinema* (pp. 1–12). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Fuchs, C. (2011). *Foundations of critical media and information studies*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Henderson, L. (2008). Queer relay. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 14*(4), 569–597.

Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Jin, D. Y. (2011). *Hands on/hands off: The Korean state and the market liberalization of the communication industry*. New York, NY: Hampton Press.

Jung, S. (2011). *Korean masculinities and transcultural consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-pop idols*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Kim, H. H. (2008, November 17). *Antique* drew 500,000 audiences in its opening week. *Maxmovie*. Retrieved from http://news.maxmovie.com/movie_info/sha_news_view.asp?newsType=&page =&contain=&keyword=&mi_id=MI0081053690

Kim, J. S., & Min, Y. (2013). Visual frames of homosexuality in popular Korean films: On *King and the Clown*, *A Frozen Flower* and *Western Antique Bakery*. *Media, Gender and Culture*, *24*, 89–154.

Kim, M. J. (2002). *A study on fanfic as a women's cyber subculture: Focusing on the relation between fantasy and gender identity* (Unpublished master's dissertation). Ewha Womans University, Seoul, South Korea.

Kim, P. H., & Singer, C. C. (2011). Three periods of Korean queer cinema: Invisible, camouflage, and blockbuster. *Acta Koreana*, *14*(1), 117–136.

Kim, S. K. (2011). Beyond globalization, regionalization and nationalism: Political economy of Korean film industry in the age of neoliberalism. *Journal of Academy of Democratic Society and Policy*, *19*, 71–93.

Kim, S. M., Huh, Y. H., & Kim, M. Y. (2007, January 1). We are film supporters. *Hangyere*. Retrieved from http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/culture_general/182392.html

Ko, K. S. (2008, October 31). Why is Choomooro into homosexuality? *Asia Economy*. Retrieved from http://www.asiae.co.kr/news/view.htm?idxno=2008103009015685759

Korean Film Council. (n.d.). List of highest-grossing films. Retrieved from http://www.kobis.or.kr/kobis/business/stat/boxs/findFormerBoxOfficeList.do?loadEnd=0&searchType=search&sMultiMovieYn=&sRepNationCd=&sWideAreaCd=

Korean Statistical Information Service. (n.d.). Domestic statistics. Retrieved from http://kosis.kr/statisticsList/statisticsList_01List.jsp?vwcd=MT_ZTITLE&parentId=A

Lee, M. J. (2005). *Perspectives and social identities of 2030 generation in Korea*. Seoul, South Korea: Samsung Economic Research Institute.

Lee, S. Y., Kim, E. M., & Kim, Y. I. (2008). The effect of the Korean screen quota system on box office performance. *Journal of World Trade*, *42*(2), 335–346.

Lim, H. (1997). *A case study on the production of a local film by the big corporation* (Unpublished master's dissertation). Chung-Ang University, Seoul, South Korea.

Marx, K. (2010). *Capital: A critique of political economy*. Moscow, Russia: Progress Publishers. (Original work published in 1887)

Moon, Y. J. (2010, June 3). Thrill me. *Financial News*. Retrieved from http://www.fnnews.com/news/201006031707526172?t=y

Mosco, V. (2009). *The political economy of communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Naver Film Rating. (n.d.). *King and the clown*. Retrieved from http://movie.naver.com/movie/bi/mi/basic.nhn?code=39894

Park, S. H. (2007). Korean cinema after liberation: Production, industry and regulatory trends. In G. Frances (Ed.), *Seoul searching: Culture and identity in contemporary Korean cinema* (pp. 15–36). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Penley, C. (1991). Brownian motion: Women, tactics and technology. In C. Penley & A. Ross (Eds.), *Technoculture* (pp. 135–161). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Peters, W. (2011). Pink dollars, white collars: *Queer as Folk*, valuable viewers, and the price of gay TV. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *28*(3), 193–212.

Prodnik, J. (2012). A note on the ongoing processes of commodification: From the audience commodity to the social factory. *tripleC*, *10*(2), 274–301.

Radin, M. J. (2005). Contested commodities. In M. Ertman & J. C. Williams (Eds.), *Rethinking commodification: Cases and readings in law and culture* (pp. 81–95). New York, NY: New York University Press.

Radin, M. J., & Sunder, M. (2005). Introduction: The subject and object of commodification. In M. Ertman & J. C. Williams (Eds.), *Rethinking commodification: Cases and readings in law and culture* (pp. 8–29). New York, NY: New York University Press.

Ryoo, J. (2009, May 26). Young women are favorable to gay friends. *Asia Today*. Retrieved from http://www.asiatoday.co.kr/news/view.asp?seq=250443

Ryoo, W. (2008). The political economy of the global mediascape: The case of the South Korean film industry. *Media, Culture and Society*, *30*(6), 873–889.

Sassatelli, R. (2007). *Consumer culture: History, theory, and politics*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Seo, M. J. (2006, February 17). "I saw it 45 times!" . . . The power of fandom toward *King and the Clown*, which reached 10 million viewers. *Kukinews*. Retrieved from http://entertain.naver.com/read?oid=143&aid=0000014613

Shim, D. (2002). South Korean media industry in the 1990s and the economic crisis. *Prometheus*, *20*(4), 337–350.

Shim, D. (2004, [May]). *The glocalization of the Korean media.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, New Orleans, LA. Retrieved from http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p113073_index.html

Shin, C. Y., & Stringer, J. (2007). Storming the big screen. In G. Frances (Ed.), *Seoul searching: Culture and identity in contemporary Korean cinema* (pp. 55–72). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Song. Y. (2009, August 27). f(x) introduced a Chinese American member, Amber, as a tomboy icon! *Newsen*. Retrieved from http://www.newsen.com/news_view.php?uid=200908270832491002

Toffler, A. (1980). *The third wave*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

Zanghellini, A. (2009). "Boys love" in anime and manga: Japanese subcultural production and its end users. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, *23*(3), 279–294.