

# STAY: Building Vibrant Community through Language

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## Introduction

There is a complex world of fan-to-fan interactions in K-pop fandoms that create vibrant communities, often by building connections through fandom specific language practices. Intercommunity fandom research provides an understanding of how online K-pop discourse communities function. The separation between the global fanbase and idol groups through both language and culture has held the attention of researchers as K-pop continues to grow. Scholarly focus has been on what allows fans to gain access to these communities and join them despite the inherent barriers that they face.

The global reach of K-pop means that fans without an understanding of Korean culture and language often rely on translated content to engage with their idol group and fandom as a whole. Multilingual fans play a crucial role in fandom accessibility and cultural literacy. Researchers have found that multilingual fans go beyond direct translations and also use their translations to provide more cultural context, definitions, and expand on concepts that might not come across clearly to foreign audiences (Cruz et al. 647; Galinska 37). One important way multilingual fans level the field for global fans' participation in fandom is by acting as "glossary providers" for language and

culture that doesn't directly translate (Samosir and Wee 6). This practice creates cultural loans that are used throughout the fandom.

Research has shown how specialized language is used as a signifier of group membership, most often through English speakers' use of the Korean language. This is exemplified in the ways that K-pop communities use cultural loans—most often honorifics, kinship terms, and language related to the idol industry (Jansen 87; Klichová 14-15). Many fans also put in effort to actually learn the language to feel a greater connection to their fandom community, idols, and Korean culture as a whole (Munawaro et al. 126; Samosir and Wee 8). Joining the culture through this use of language demonstrates investment and membership in their community.

Research that looks even closer at online communities observes how specialized language practices contribute to individual fan identity. It is common for people to create new accounts specifically for the fandom space that include references to idols' names, songs, phrases, or other related fandom specific information. Ayumi et al. explain this practice as a way for fans to communicate that they are an active participant in the community while identifying themselves through unique combinations of details like their musical preferences or favorite members (238). While the research done by Ayumi et al. was narrowed very specifically on usernames, seeing the impact of fandom specific language in introducing oneself demonstrates its wider importance in identity formation within fandom.

This research has collectively shown some of the social dynamics and language practices in K-pop fandoms as a whole. Looking at the gap in existing research, there is a lack of scholarship around the lexis that is specific to individual fandoms. Furthermore,

there is very little research examining how individual members of an idol group are discussed with a different lexis, often led by those in the community who prefer that specific member (claim them as their favorite). The language specific to an idol group, not just K-pop as a whole, is an important part of the discourse community's identity.

In this paper, I take a closer look at the language specific to the idol group Stray Kids, narrowed to their STAY fandom on Threads. My research demonstrates how the lexis of individual groups within STAY create diversity in the fandom experience. This research is significant to the conversation about language practices in K-pop fandoms because it looks beyond language as an entry point and demonstrates its role in maintaining a community. The impact of this lexis is shown by looking at the language practices on the individual, close, and community wide level. This research contributes towards a greater understanding of the complexity of STAY's fandom language practices and the social connections they form.

## Methodology

In order to observe the language practices within the STAY community, there were three methods of research that I conducted—a survey, two interviews, and observing community posts. The survey allowed me to see more broadly how people interact with the fandom, observe language use, and collect examples of specialized language within the community. Conducting interviews provided a more personal look into how the community speaks about individual members and how people interact with each other in fandom. The observations provided examples of the broad spectrum of specialized language used within the community. These methods were chosen with the goal of showing the multifaceted nature of STAY.

I first made a post sharing that I was working on a paper and asking people to fill out the linked survey. The survey had six questions asking about the members that appear most on their feed, how they observe language being used about individual members (in themselves and the wider community), and their understanding of specialized language that isn't referencing their bias. I also included a free response question asking people to share their favorite examples of specialized language used by STAY.

My interviews were both active conversations through online messaging conducted on February 16th with Rebecca and February 18th with Sarah, who are both members of the STAY community on Threads. I focused on asking about the members to see how they discussed them individually, how they personally experience interactions between groups, and their general views and feelings within the fandom. My intention with these interviews was not to get explicit examples of the specialized language within the community but rather its impact on social connections.

For observations, I looked at posts within the Stray Kids STAY community on Threads and took note of the discrepancies in elements like tone, nicknames, and inside jokes (fandom references) when discussing each individual group member. This allowed me to get a view of the wider community, not just the people who interact within my curated space.

# Discussion

## Biases Groups and the OT8 Mindset

From an outside perspective, it may seem intuitive that there is different language used to discuss eight different people, as there are in Stray Kids. An important aspect of this conversation is K-pop’s culture of putting the whole group first, an OT8 mindset, to separate oneself from “solo” fans. With this in mind, many fans are hesitant to recognize the language differences when they are asked. Figure 1 demonstrates that 88% of survey takers do observe a difference in how individual members are referred to; in figure 2 however, only 70% of survey takers say there is a difference in their personal use of language. Regardless of the intentionality of this discrepancy, post observations demonstrate that figure 1 shows the most accuracy in general fandom language use around individual members.

Do you notice a difference in how people talk about individual members?  
(Tone, Nicknames, Inside Jokes, etc.)  
33 responses

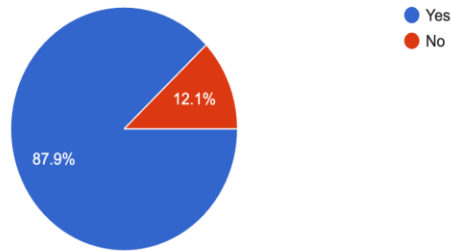


Figure 1. "Do you notice a difference in how people talk about individual members?"

Is there a difference in the language YOU use to talk about individual members? (Tone, Nicknames, Inside Jokes, etc.)  
33 responses

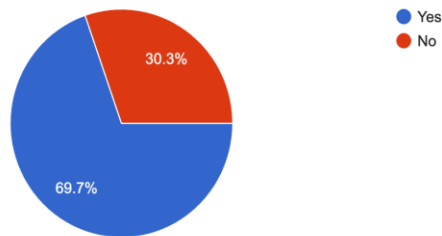


Figure 2. "Is there a difference in the language YOU use to talk about individual members?"

Sarah, a member of the STAY community, shares that, "I think people will generally focus on their bias, even if it's done unconsciously. The OT8 mindset is definitely there, but the bias wins out in the end." This is demonstrated further in the responses for peoples' understanding of the language used to reference members that are not their bias in figure 3. While very few survey takers felt they had no understanding of references to other members, over 50% of participants shared that they only sometimes understand. Additionally, despite only 15% of survey responders selecting less than three members on figure 4, the overall data demonstrates that fans engage with members differently at even the most basic level. This provides some insights into how fans engage with bias groups and individualized lexis within STAY.

Do you feel like you understand and use those specialized references for members that are NOT your bias?  
33 responses

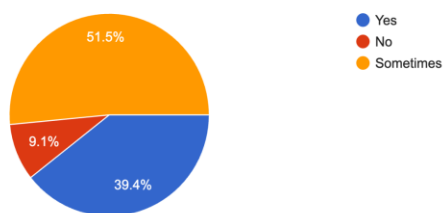


Figure 3. "Do you feel like you understand and use those specialized references for members that are NOT your bias?"

Which member(s) do you primarily see on your feed?  
33 responses

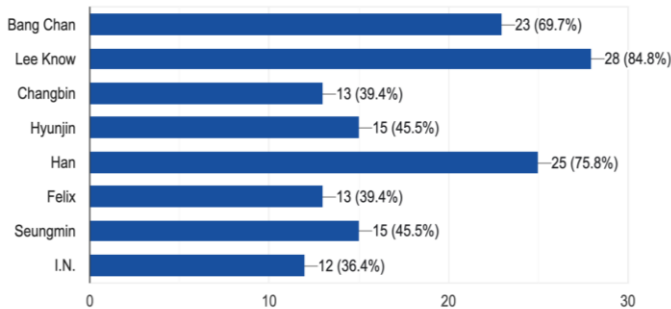


Figure 4. "Which member(s) do you primarily see on your feed?"

## Nicknames and Tone

The lexis around individual members is built mostly through nicknames and the tone used in relation to them. These are also the cornerstone of lexis that binds bias groups and contributes to overall fandom diversity. Over 60% of the survey responses that I received with examples of specialized language were nicknames for a variety of members, regardless of who they had selected in figure 4. One member, I.N for example, is often referred to as “Baby Bread” by the fandom. Over the years, this has evolved to switching out related titles depending on the tone someone is using when talking about him—i.e. “Feral Focaccia” when a user is discussing a mature stage performance. This hyper-specific lexis was mentioned by 40% of the free responses that I received. Another member, HAN, often has nicknames with a “cute” tone assigned to him, which is exemplified in the free response section of my survey. In post observations, almost 50% of the posts referencing HAN specifically used one of those nicknames or associated tone, regardless of post content. When I was discussing the members with Rebecca, she demonstrated further some of the differences in tone that fans use, sharing that, “with Chan, I love how he looks after the other members... For

Lee Know, I love his fun goofy side...” Sarah shared a similar sentiment about Bang Chan when she described him as, “the reliable one who tries to keep things together, solves problems before they’re actually problems: someone who’s like the parent of the group.” The tone around Bang Chan’s leadership contributes into the specific language that the fandom uses when they speak about him. These interviews highlight the tone that is consistent with the wider community’s discussions around these members and its impact on the individualized lexis.

## References to Content

Another important type of lexis that fans use to communicate is references to content and creating fandom jokes surrounding these moments. Secondary to their music, Stray Kids put out variety show style content, vlogs, behind the scenes videos, and more on their youtube channel. Rebecca shared that, “they brought a sense of comfort through their content... watching them being silly and goofy on skz code or talkers is what made me fall in love,” which is an experience shared by many. This variety of content allows the fandom to flourish further and is the starting point for much of the lexis STAY uses. There were direct references to phrases and jokes used in their content like, “there’s a piece of pineapple inside my burgah,” in 35% of the free responses that I received. In addition to direct references, it is common for lexis to develop within STAY that builds off of these moments and become their own inside knowledge. These kinds of references like, “the weather is nice” for example, were found in 45% of survey responses. With over eight years of fandom history, this type of lexis within STAY is likely a large factor in why figure 3 only has around 40% of respondents stating that they always understand references that aren’t related to their

bias. In the STAY community, the entry point is simply interest and love for the group and its members, therefore, the established lexis is learned slowly over time as one invests more into the fandom.

## Conclusion

### Analysis

There is a clear diversity of experience within the STAY community due to the lexis individualized around each member in Stray Kids. The survey responses had many repeating themes and answers that demonstrate connectivity within the fandom, and yet, almost every single response contained at least one example that hadn't been shared. Sarah and Rebecca both shared in our discussions that they love posts around the individual members because it allows them to see more of everyone. These posts contribute to the dynamic lexis STAY uses as it drives the language to be ever growing and changing. As the language continues to shift, people joining STAY can find as much joy and participation as someone who started at Stray Kids' debut. As Rebecca beautifully states, "I think that's also what brings us together as a fandom, we all have different backgrounds but despite that we all connect to [Stray Kids] in some way or another." The lexis STAY creates around each member is the basis for a vibrant community that remains connected because of their diverse interests and passions, rather than despite it.

### Future Research

This look inside the STAY community has shown how the broad lexis used around individual members expands the community and allows for more fulfilling

engagement from fans. One limitation of this research was the scope. Most of the data came from my personal following and curated feed within the community. One of the clearest examples of this was in the survey responses' focus on Bang Chan, Lee Know, and HAN, which differs from the wider community. While I don't believe that this changes the authenticity of my data, it would be impactful to see how a similar research project would go from another perspective. Additionally, while it lies outside of language specifically, it would add to the scholarship around STAY to see a greater analysis of the social connections within the community than what I was able to touch on in this paper.

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the language practices used in the K-pop fandom STAY and the role it plays in fostering community. By focusing on the lexis specific to bias groups, this research demonstrates the diversity of experience and engagement within STAY. Examining group dynamics, nicknames and tone, and references to content reveals a dynamic shared language at the foundation of social interactions within the community. As the interaction between language practices and building connection online is ever evolving, this paper contributes to a growing understanding and exploration of its manifestations specific to STAY.

**Bio:** Eliana Wages is a first year English Education major at Western Oregon University. She is passionate about teaching and has spent over 5 years in ECE before making the switch to higher education. As a lifelong Oregonian, she hopes to continue to make a positive impact on the children and families in her community. Eliana always strives for a balanced and relaxing life through her love of music, literature, and games.