

Denial is a River in Egypt: your bias is gay!

How RPS may help to queer the idol industry shown through the example of Haobin

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Abstract:

This essay examines the real-person-slash / real-person-shipping(RPS)practices within the K-Pop community and industry through the example of Haobin, a popular ship in the group Zerobaseone consisting of Sung Hanbin and Zhang Hao. I will briefly show the origin of RPS in South Korea, explore fan practices and show examples of idols engaging positively with shipping. My aim is to readjust the view on RPS as offering a safe space for queer fans and idols to reach outto each other and finding joy in sharing this rather weird form of intimacy.

Tags:

#Haobin #K-Pop, pwp – point what point? #heterophobic just like Hao wants me to be #AU: everyone is queer in some way and the world is good
#Shipping #rps #parasocial relationship #queerbaiting #bias #tinhatting
#skinship #coupling

Hier geht's zum Glossar!



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When thinking about K-Pop, what comes to mind immediately are not only the extravagant music videos, the flashy outfits, the crazy fans or the sometimes experimental sound, but the pretty boys and girls that make up a group. Fangirls and fanboys alike swoon over them, vying for attention at their concerts: How wonderful would it be if they just noticed me, waved at me, blew me a kiss...or kissed another member. What? Yes, some of us would rather see them kiss each other. If this seems weird and gross to you, you are not alone. But there are many fans secretly (and not so secretly) hiding within society that enjoy this practice of RPS – real-person-slash, or real-person-shipping. It has a long history within the K-Pop community and industry, and is and should not be deemed inherently harmful. RPS is not a deep, dark secret that fans participate in but rather has become a staple in the industry and is now used by companies to gain attention for their groups. Research in this area is scarce as the K-Pop industry is not known to be one that shares its business practices. The idols themselves rarely speak up about it. Nevertheless, interest in RPS and real-person-fiction (RPF) [EU6.1] alike have grown over the years, and some researchers (and fans) have started to critically engage with the topic to get to its origin and settle the question on the ethical concerns of this practice, such as Baudinette (2023) and Sedlmeir (2024). The first one is easy to answer, and I will give a brief overview of it in my essay. The latter; however, is one that may not ever be truly resolved. One may view RPS or RPF as deviant and exploitative because it involves real people and is therefore deemed inherently unethical. Others may find joy in it and use it as a form of fantasy play that is, in and of itself, not harmful. At the end of the day, it is a personal preference and both sides bring up valid points that I will discuss. However, for the purpose of this essay I will point towards more favourable arguments regarding shipping and RPS as I view it as a practice that may help disrupt the status quo that the idol industry so desperately tries to hold onto regardless of the detriment it has been causing its participants. Furthermore, most research on the matter seems to be focused on the fans and their affective responses (such as Choi (2023)) but disregards the potential positive influence RPS and RPF can have on the idols themselves. I do not claim to have any insider knowledge, nor do I have any associations or links to the idols that I mention here and can therefore not verify my theories. I also do not claim that any of them are actually gay and this essay is not meant to prove their queerness either. The goal of this essay is to get others to view RPS in a different light and recognise that there is little to no harm in reading your K-Pop bias as queer. I will attempt this by showing examples of a very popular ship within 5th gen K-Pop: Hao/Hanbin from Zerobaseone, also known under their ship name Haobin.

As I will demonstrate, they hold a somewhat unique position within the shipping community as well as the K-Pop industry. But first, it is necessary to briefly explain the origins of and research on RPS.

The age-old practice of imagining your favs as gay

Before diving in, it is important to point out that South Korean society and the entertainment industry are not LGBTQ+ friendly, quite on the contrary pride festivals have been disrupted by conservatives and evangelical Christians (Choi, 2023, p. 121-122). This makes it hard for actually queer celebrities as they face a lot of discrimination (ibid.). In contrast to this, K-Pop idols perform homoerotic gestures such as holding hands or carrying each other bridal style. Fans pick up on these gestures and may interpret them as romantic, thus leading to shipping the idols. But where does this practice come from?

At least for South Korean fans, according to Cho (2023, p. 123), it started with the introduction to Yaoi culture in the 1980s. Baudinette (2023, p. 249-250) agrees and claims that the Boys Love tradition served as background knowledge for fans to produce these homoerotic fantasies. But shippers faced many obstacles, such as in 2000 when the Internet Content Rating System rated the first lesbian and gay community website called exzone as “harmful media content for minors”; this rating was only removed 4 years later (Cho, 2023, p. 124). But the industry changed as shipping became more popular despite such obstacles. Cho (ibid.) points out that in second generation K-Pop idols, shipping was encouraged by the entertainment companies through fanfiction and parodying romantic scenes from K-Dramas. An example of this would be Heechul from Super Junior who wrote his own fanfiction of members Eunhyuk and Donghae, and Big Bang who reenacted the kiss scene in Secret Garden. A new marketing tactic was born: “Bijeuniseu gei peopomeonseu” (bigepeo for short), which translates to “business gay performance”, i.e. the performance of queerness as a strategy to garner interest (ibid.).

But why?

Why not? In her thought-provoking article “Alpeseu (RPS) and Business Gay Performance in the Korean K-Pop World” Cho (2023, p. 127) points towards the fact that dating between idol and fan is discouraged, even in fanfictions, thus the safest way to claim ownership over an idol’s body is by making that body incapable of falling in love with any one other than their group mate. This is a rather reductive and harmful assertion in my opinion. Shipping is a controversial part within the fan community regardless of whether it is done between members of an idol group or idol and fan. Similarly, Baudinette’s (2023, p. 249) assertion that “keoppeuling” (coupling) is an integral part of consuming idol culture and, as

Jungmin Kwon says, may help fans explore their own sexual desire for the idol, ignores that fans do not just project themselves and their desires on the idols but are capable to pick up on certain signs. Both articles, however, also point towards the queer potential of RPS/RPF for fans. Baudinette (2023, p. 260) highlights that the fans do not believe that their idols are actually attracted to the same sex and are aware of the business practices the companies utilise. Sedlmeir (2024, p. 10) also brings up the point that idols depend in the fans' favour and thus perform acts of "fanservice" such as acting cute, giving encouraging words or initiating skinship with a certain member they are shipped with. As most idol groups tend to be same sex groups, these interactions are almost always homoerotic (Sedlmeir, 2024, p. 14).

Companies train their idols to build a parasocial relationship with fans by showing their daily lives, vlogging, reality shows and fansign interaction.

In the latter, a limited amount of fans get the chance to speak to their idols for a short period of time (just a few minutes at a time), to ask them questions or illicit certain behaviours from them. These interactions are not entirely natural, as the chosen fans spent copious amounts of money to get this chance, which the idols are aware of, and the companies review the fans' questions beforehand and censor them if deemed necessary.

Nevertheless, companies encourage shipping and will pair certain members together more often for unit photoshoots, songs or variety show contents. Fans feed on these interactions and draw inspiration from them.

Another factor that facilitates shipping is the alternative form of masculinity that is often presented by K-Pop idols. Some idols are known for their androgynous appearance and their so called "hybrid masculinity" or "flower boy" image (Veselá, 2024, p. 31-32). These idols have more feminine features and slim figures which are appealing to the fans. By Western standards, this type of masculinity is often perceived as gay (ibid.).

There are many more reasons as to why fans ship idols that I unfortunately cannot get into but the examples I've presented should show that fans do not just willy-nilly take random idols and decide they are gay.

Companies encourage certain behaviours, whether that is to strengthen the parasocial relationship or to market their idols as desirable yet unattainable (and thus even more desirable). Fans pick up on this and engage with these practices in their own way and for their own reasons.

Some may tinhat about their ship's daily life, others analyse their birth charts or do tarot card readings, some write RPF, and some weirdos think it is okay to invade the idols' privacy or ask invasive questions during fansigns.

But the act of shipping itself is a creative endeavour and speaks to the fans' media literacy and knowledge of the industry. However, what about the idols?

You're making them uncomfortable!

This statement is often iterated when anti-shippers stumble (or invade) shipping spaces and see people shipping idols. Oh, the horrors: Someone needs to protect these poor idols from the evil, dirty shippers! As Cho (2023, p. 125) examines, idols are not supposed to grow a beard, smoke or date, and are heavily infantilised by their fan base.

Shipping content in particular should be hidden from them. While I agree that shipping ultimately is something that fans should keep within their own fandom boundaries, many shippers keep to their own communities and make sure that the idols do not find their content.

Websites such as neospring.org or mond.how offer platforms for shippers to engage with each other by asking questions, sharing their tinhats, offering translations or engaging in gossip. Many of them will utilise so called RPS names, which are either censored versions of the idol's name or aliases. Fans deliberately hide their (sometimes) insane musing and ship content from the idols and other fans. For the ship between Korean member Sung Hanbin and Chinese member Zhang Hao from Zerobaseone, this means that certain accounts will refer to Hanbin as B1in, B*n or 2 (as this was his final rank in the survival show the group was established through). For Hao, people refer to him as H4o, 1 (again, his rank), or Neul (Hao's name means sky in Chinese, the Korean equivalent thereof is Neul).

Queer signalling?

The reason why I see Hanbin and Hao, both as a ship as well as independently as individuals, as a worthwhile and interesting case study, is because both idols have links to the LGBTQ+ community in their pasts. Idols are encouraged to maintain a vague stance on their sexuality as the potential same sex attraction may act as a buffer for possible dating scandals (Sedlmeir, 2024).

But sometimes this potential becomes more believable through their actions and past associations. In the case of Sung Hanbin, fans have pointed out that he is a professional dancer who specialised in waacking, which is a queer influenced dance style, as well as tutting, a hip-hop style that goes well with waacking (Veselá, 2024, p. 33-34).

Many old videos of his rather flamboyant dancing exist on the internet (an example of this is his famous dance to Rupaul's Call Me Mother) and he still incorporates both waacking and tutting in his performance as an idol and covers both dances and challenges that include these dance styles (see his "Artist of the month" performance of Bad Boy). Recently, their dorm lives have been shown, including a quick look into their bedrooms (MBC WORLD, 2025).

Fans were eager to analyse every small pixel. They found that Hanbin owns an extensive perfume collection, which includes a limited-edition bottle of Dirty Rainbow by borntostandout, a company that claims to support the queer community and donated all incomes from the 2000 bottles available to carefully selected LGBTQ+ organisations (borntostandout.official, 2024; @princesshaobao, 2025).

As for Hao, his ties to the community are more ambiguous. He too participated in waacking and tutting classes during his years as an idol trainee, but what most fans take as definite proof of his queerness are rumours about him posting certain statements on an old, no longer existent blog that he supposedly ran. In such a post he took a rather negative stance towards opposite-sex couples, stating: “Haha~~ I can’t ever accept opposite-sex marriages...so gross...why would opposite-sex marriage ever exist in the world! Being together when you’re not the same sex, that’s so hardcore!! I can’t understand it.” (Koreaboo, 2023). These posts are a controversial topic amongst fans as it is unclear if they are mistranslations or completely fake and fabricated. Some fans also pointed out that, considering neither China nor South Korea are LGBTQ+ friendly, “outing” Hao like this is not only harmful to his career but also dangerous and thus these posts should not be shared or discussed. Whether or not one believes the “truth” of these posts, it is important to highlight that fans had a generally positive reaction to them.

Hanbin and Hao are also unique in the sense that their “relationship” started right in front of the public’s eye. Both were contestants on a show called Boy’s Planet, in which 99 male trainees from different companies competed against each other to secure a spot in a temporary nine-member group later called Zerobaseone. Both were top contestants, continuously ranking in the top 10, Hanbin holding his first rank almost throughout the entire show.

Both were leaders and centers of their respective subgroups (the contestants were divided into the Korean group and the Global group). Initially posed as rivals, it soon became clear to the audience that these two shared a special bond and helped and encouraged each other instead of sabotaging the other to snatch their spot. In one episode, Hanbin is shown to struggle.

He has a breakdown over the massive pressure he is facing and locks himself into the laundry room (one of the few rooms without a camera). Hao is then shown to go into this room and they both later reveal that Hao consoled Hanbin.

The camera cuts to them on a bed with Hao asking for a massage from Hanbin as a thank-you. Many more moments followed as both men made it into the final lineup of the group, holding hands and ascending the stairs together (something that has never happened before in a survival show). Boy’s Planet holds almost infinite moments of these two being lovey-dovey, and fans still live off of them.

Half a year after their debut, a TikTok was posted of the two participating in the dance challenge to “Water” by Tyla. What makes this so special is that they did it in front of a fan commissioned ad which read “Love is Love” with their pictures beneath it. They purposefully chose this location to film and even zoomed in at the end. Fans took it as a sweet and subtle acknowledgment that both idols at least seem to agree with the statement. For South Korean (and Chinese) standards this already means a lot.

Another subtle hint to their knowledge of LGBTQ+ culture happened during a fansign when they reenacted a scene from an American animated short film called “In a heartbeat”, produced by Ringling College of Art and Design. They acted out the infamous scene of the two main characters pulling at a heart. Fans were shocked by this as it is a rather old film (released in 2017) and they were not prompted to do this.

That’s fanservice

As I have discussed earlier, companies are aware of the appeal of ships and shipping and will capitalise on it. Setting ethical concerns aside, idols are seen as rather passive in this scenario. However, what makes Hanbin and Hao unique is that they both actively participate in it. Hao especially seems to find a lot of joy in goading fans with anecdotes about him and Hanbin. He even told fans to keep shipping him with Hanbin (Koreaboo, 2025).

While Hanbin is slightly more conscious of his idol persona and treads more carefully, he too has made some rather bold statements. He likened his relationship with Hao to that of a married couple, and refers to Hao as his “eternal other half”, “mirror” and “soulmate” multiple times throughout livestreams, variety shows or vlogs (TEO 테오, 2025).

It is fair to deem such interactions as fanservice as they are very in-your-face and published by their company. However, the argument does not hold for long, especially if one digs a little or is familiar with how K-Pop companies love to capitalise on their favourite ships. Hanbin and Hao who are both massively popular idols (Hanbin ranked second and Hao first in Boy’s Planet, both have a very active and big fanbase outside of the group and continuously get brand deals) and the most popular ship within the fandom (as of DATE, 2025, 3,495 fanfictions on AO3 are tagged “Sung Hanbin/Zhang Hao”).

And yet the actual content fans get from them is miniscule. There have been duo TikToks, some variety show appearances and even a “couple” livestream in which they talked about going on a date to a flower shop and picking flowers for each other, but in comparison to other ships in the same group and even outside of it, fans are forced to live off of crumbs most of the time.

Many moments happen somewhere in the background of a vlog or are revealed through anecdotes either by them or other members of the group; both idols have bemoaned this lack of duo activity. Can one really throw around the accusation of fanservice when the fans don't feel serviced? There even have been rumours about a Haobin ban by the company as they are continuously separated during games and livestreams. Especially considering they are not opposed to lean into the fanservice and shipping content (as can be seen by their endorsement of other ships), it seems suspicious as to why the company will not capitalise on their two most famous idols. Are Hanbin and Hao toying the line between "real" and "performed" queerness too closely? Does the potential feel too real for the company and fans alike and is thus running the risk of threatening the established heterosexuality (and asexuality) of the idol persona? Perhaps. At the end of the day, neither "owes" anyone a coming out just to disprove the fanservice allegations. It is unsafe for them to ascertain their queerness. However, RPS might, at least in this instance, turn out to be beneficial.

Opening up a queer space

I have now briefly introduced the origins of RPS, talked about fan practices and given a concrete example of an idol ship that seems to at least somewhat subvert and destabilise the status quo.

What I wanted to show is that RPS is not a perverted practice. Yes, certain boundaries should never be crossed and unfortunately some fans do, but the practice in and of itself is not harmful. Some idols, such as Hao, seem to even enjoy engaging with shippers.

I do not claim it to be an incredibly rebellious political act that will bring upon us the age of queer acceptance, but it may offer a small (and weird) space for LGBTQ+ fans and idols alike to send smoke signals to each other.

I do not think it is productive of fans to insist on their idols being straight just because they work in a homophobic country and industry.

That does not mean that idols should forcefully be outed against their will or harassed over shipping discourse; however, when an idol sends certain signals, why should those not be received and interpreted in a certain way?

If they cannot formally come out, fans and idols rely on hints and little nudges towards their queerness to make space for themselves and their identity. RPS can offer such a space. Neither Hanbin nor Hao seem particularly bothered by their shippers, who even have their own fandom name (zerocolas). They happily share anecdotes and whether or not they are real or exaggerated is something we as fans are not privy to in the first place.

As a fan of them, I take what I am given and sometimes these things read as gay to me. Who am I to tell them they are not? Statistically speaking, it is impossible

that every idol is straight and that no one has ever dated their group mate. They do not owe me any proof that they are or are not gay or dating but if I see them deeply staring into the other's eyes and Hanbin literally forgetting to breathe, then yes, I will consider that something more is going on between them. That in and of itself is not harmful. If they tell me time and time again that they mean the world to each other and wish to work and live together for a long time, why am I the pervert for insinuating that they might be a little gay for each other? As long as fans keep their crazier (and NSFW) tinhats and theories to themselves and do not invade the idols' privacy, RPS can be a space for idols to safely signal their queerness to fans in hopes of them picking up the crumbs. If fans can recognise that idols can actually (and not just in fictional contexts) be queer and that these two things do not contradict each other, then maybe, at some point, it will be save for idols to come out and claim their space freely and openly.

More research is needed in this field and the study of idols in general; my essay barely touches the surface. There is so much to analyse in the idol industry and the characters it brings forth, how queerness is used as marketing but also frowned upon, the stereotypes that are perpetuated through RPS, the lived experiences of openly queer idols (such as Holland or Bain) etc. I lack the space but others who I have mentioned (and many others, among which is Hong, 2020, who I have not quoted here but has helped me to form my thoughts) were able to go into more depth on certain topics. I hope to follow them at some point and dive into the world of K-Pop RPS with heavier gear. There is a lot to be found beneath the glittery exterior of K-Pop, ranging from dark stuff to joy and a lot of queer shit. For now though, I will happily put on my tinhat and watch some more Haobin compilations.

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