



Fangirling at 40: A K-pop Fan’s Journey from Manila to Seoul

Mylene T. De Guzman

Fig. 1. Author’s view at MyCon Manila. (Photo courtesy of the author, 2023)

Fig. 2: The author (right) and her family in MyCon Manila. (Photo courtesy of the author, 2023)

Fig. 3. MAMAMOO in MyCon Manila. (Photo courtesy of the author, 2023)



It took me a while to willingly accept that I, at 40, am a K-pop fan. I am fairly new to K-pop, only discovering the genre’s allure and vibrant culture at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. The household proceeded to be filled with K-pop beats, and my bedroom became a sacred place where family and friends gathered to watch BLACKPINK’s online concert “The Show” in 2021, along with 280,000 others worldwide.¹ I can still recall the bouts of anxiety that I felt that day, praying that Metro Manila’s spotty Internet connection would not fail during the concert.

Streaming platforms became the *de facto* form of leisure for everyone in my household, and my son repeatedly played Dingo’s “Killing Voice” videos on YouTube, which showcase live singing, a much-debated issue within the K-pop industry. It was during one of these watch sessions that I chanced upon a video featuring MAMAMOO. To say that I was blown away by the performance would be a huge understatement. I sat in complete awe as these four women – Moonbyul, Solar, Wheein, and Hwasa – sang their greatest hits in a medley. Atypical for a K-pop performance, there were no back-up dancers or complicated choreographies, which allowed the viewers to focus on what mattered most: their voices. I quickly went down the MAMAMOO rabbit hole, consuming every video available on YouTube.

My fixation with MAMAMOO eventually led to the decision to pursue graduate studies in South Korea, and to immerse myself in the culture that birthed K-pop. By now, I have been to multiple MAMAMOO concerts, festivals, and musicals in Seoul,

Manila, and Seattle. Attending concerts in various countries gave me a unique perspective and allowed me to reflect on the differences and similarities of the K-pop fandom experience. MAMAMOO launched their MyCon World Tour with MyCon Seoul held across three concert dates from November 18–20, 2022. After MyCon Seoul, the group went to perform in eight cities across Asia (Tokyo, Hong Kong, Taipei, Bangkok, Jakarta, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila) and nine cities in the United States (New York, Baltimore, Atlanta, Nashville, Fort Worth, Chicago, Glendale, Oakland, and Los Angeles). MyCon Seoul served as my baptism of fire into the MAMAMOO fandom. As a “baby moo,” waiting for the online queue to finally let me enter the site to buy the ticket was nerve-racking, but I eventually successfully snagged a standing ticket that allowed me to see MAMAMOO up close. Ticketing for MyCon Manila was similarly stressful and was very quickly sold out. Thankfully, due to popular demand, more seats were added, and I was eventually able to purchase tickets for my family and me.

Queueing was painfully present at both concerts, but despite the long wait, fellow fans were organized and patient. To this day, I could still recall the tiny bursts of excitement that I felt every time the line moved.

In terms of production, K-pop concerts in Seoul are usually grander than overseas concerts. MyCon Seoul featured a live band during the concert, noticeably absent in the other MyCon stops.

As a first-time K-pop concert attendee, I was overwhelmed by the massive LED

screens, synchronized lightsticks, and the audience’s disciplined fan chants – all of which were standard fare in the South Korean concert scene. For MyCon Manila, we arrived at the venue four hours before the concert started, and even then, there were already a lot of people around Araneta Coliseum. Several “moos” were distributing free fan-made merchandise, and there were a few individuals attempting to resell tickets at a much higher price. It was also the first time that I became aware of “Team Labas” – literally meaning “Team Outside,” which refers to fans unable to secure a ticket. Basically, Team Labas stays around the arena and jams to the live music coming from the concert. Araneta Coliseum is popular among Team Labas, owing to its acoustics, which allow people outside to still hear the performances clearly. Team Labas members are usually well-organized and connected on social media, with some organizers also providing merch and, in some cases, even free tickets to the concert from donations.

Having already attended MyCon Seoul, I was familiar with the concert set list, but the concert experience in MyCon Manila was different from the one in South Korea. The LED screen was tiny in Manila, with those in cheaper seats barely able to see anything. The lightsticks were also unsynchronized, but it was a delight to see fans change the color of their lightsticks (most of them unofficial) to match the songs. The crowd was not just a group of passive spectators – we were active participants in the over three-hour collective musical experience. Filipino fans are renowned for their cheers and for singing entire songs, a stark difference from

the audience that I saw in Seoul, where fans mostly did chants. Hearing the entire stadium singing (mostly) mispronounced Korean lyrics to my favorite MAMAMOO songs was such an emotional experience. I could not help but shed tears several times during the show.

The fact that I was able to enjoy it with my family made the concert all the more emotional, and while I definitely had better seats in MyCon Seoul, watching a K-pop concert in my home country felt like a fitting homecoming. It represented a culmination of my transnational K-pop journey, which started in my bedroom in Manila, took me to multiple concert venues in Seoul, and then finally brought me back to my home city in the Philippines.

Mylene T. De Guzman is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of the Philippines – Diliman. She has recently earned her PhD in Media and Communication from the Media School, Hallym University, South Korea. Her research explored the fandom landscapes and mediascapes of international K-pop fans, offering insights into the transnational flows of Korean popular culture and its global consumption. Email: mtdeguzman1@up.edu.ph

Notes

1 Dong, Sun-hwa (2021, February 01). BLACKPINK’s “THE SHOW” draws 280,000 viewers. *The Korea Times*. <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/entertainment/k-pop/20210201/blackpinks-the-show-draws-280000-viewers>