

### 3. Digital Mediascape of the Korean Wave

In Yoon, K. (2020). *Digital Mediascapes of Transnational Korean Youth Culture*. London: Routledge (pages 45-72).

<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780429469251>

NOTE: This is pre-proof version.

Popular cultural content and styles from other countries—Japan and the United States (US) in particular—have until recently been influential in shaping young people’s cultural practices in Korea. Some Korean critics and audiences have even considered Korean music, television (TV) shows, and films as more or less knockoffs of their Western or Japanese counterparts until recently (Shin, 2016). The media producers have sometimes been accused of plagiarizing similar foreign—American or Japanese—texts.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, the recent flow of Korean popular culture has shown how a latecomer to the global cultural and media markets has not only caught up with global (e.g., the US) and regional (e.g., Japan) powerhouses but also explored enthusiastic fan bases around the world.

The global sensation of the K-pop group BTS since the mid-2010s demonstrates the emerging power of the Korean youth cultural form in the global mediascape. On April 12, 2019, the *Guinness World Records* recognized “Boy With Luv,” a new BTS song, as the most viewed YouTube video in 24 hours; it garnered 74.6 million streaming views on the first day of its release. BTS had already broken the world record in the same category twice in the previous year—in August (the “Idol” music video) and May (the “Fake Love” music video). In June 2018, the seven-member K-pop group was recognized by *Time* magazine as one of “the 25 most influential people on the Internet.” The group’s fame was not limited to YouTube; rather, it was also observable in the mainstream media in several countries, as evidenced in the group’s appearance on major network TV shows, including *Saturday Night Live*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, *Good Morning America*, and *Britain’s Got Talent*. Furthermore, the group won in two major categories of the 2019 Billboard Music Awards and successfully continued stadium concerts in New York, London, and several other cities in 2019 (Frankenberg, 2019).

The global fandom of BTS is one of the latest examples of the transnational flow of Korean popular culture, known as the Korean Wave or *Hallyu* in Korean. The Korean Wave phenomenon forces us to ask how Korean popular culture, which has been deeply affected by, and has sought to catch up with, the West (and Japan), has emerged as a *global* cultural form that appeals to young people in numerous countries. As discussed in Chapter 2, Korea’s media fan (*deokhu*) culture has evolved in young people’s negotiation of overseas cultural forces, on the

one hand, and the emerging environment of digital technologies, on the other. While Korean youth cultural styles inscribed in K-pop and other Korean Wave content are undeniably and to a large extent hybrid products of Western or Japanese cultural forms (Lie, 2012), Korean youth cultural forms have recently constituted a globally influential cultural trend. For example, BTS's global fan base, referred to as the ARMY, generates a vibrant and networked form of youth fandom that is equipped with digital literacy.

Global fans' engagement with K-pop illustrates an intriguing process of transnational cultural consumption in the social media era. As evidenced by the music video for Psy's global hit, "Gangnam Style," which was sung entirely in Korean without initially targeting an international audience, certain local cultural forms accidentally go viral through their integration into social media platforms beyond national and regional borders. In the emerging social media ecology, certain popular cultural forms are not only circulated through conventional channels, such as broadcast media, but also explore their own routes. K-pop has rapidly adapted to social media environments and has redefined itself as a visual/performative cultural form, thereby reducing probable linguistic barriers. K-pop's dispersed fan audiences are exposed to "free" content<sup>2</sup> on YouTube and share their feelings with fans who may be viewing the same music videos on the other side of the world. Intriguingly, K-pop's transnational flows reveal how cultural consumption involves media fans' networking and participation. Global K-pop fans not only consume cultural texts in a conventional way but also share, rework, reappropriate, and remediate the original texts through different forms of social media and user participation. For example, K-pop fans not only listen to K-pop and discuss their favorite K-pop idols but also practice these idols' choreographies and upload their own performances to YouTube. Some bilingual fans translate K-pop texts into different languages, sharing the translated subtitles on fan sites (i.e., "fansubbing"). These fan translations are often ongoing and collaborative processes in which some fans initially translate, while others revise to improve the early translations. Due to these fan practices, the boundaries between production and consumption are increasingly blurred. As a cultural form of *difference*, K-pop allows its overseas fans to "translate" it from their own perspectives and "re-localize" it (Yoon, 2017).

To examine how K-pop is transnationally circulated, translated, and re-localized by its overseas fans in social media environments, this chapter draws on a text analysis of K-pop fan videos and interviews with young Canadian K-pop fans. The field studies were conducted in Canadian cities between 2015 and 2017, and 50 self-claimed K-pop fans were recruited via advertisements and snowballing, and interviewed individually. The interviewees, who had various ethno-cultural backgrounds (including Asian and White), were under the age of 30 years. In the semistructured interviews, these young Canadians discussed how they were introduced to K-pop, how they appropriated digital media for their fan activities, and how they enjoyed, felt, and thought about K-pop in their daily contexts. The field study period—from 2015 to 2017—overlapped with the rapid rise of K-pop among young people in Canada and numerous other countries. In particular, during this period, the Canadian news media depicted Vancouver and Toronto as emerging fan bases of global K-pop culture (Lee-Shanok, 2016; Nair, 2017; Shahzad, 2017). Drawing on the young Canadian fans' lived experiences, this chapter explores how K-pop as a youth cultural form originating and/or packaged in Korea is transnationally circulated, signified, and negotiated by overseas young people.

The chapter begins with reviewing the recent discussions of transnational flows of Korean popular culture, which is followed by an analysis of the emerging media environments enabling the global rise of K-pop. In particular, by looking at the interwoven processes of media convergence—corporate and grassroots convergence, the chapter proposes a framework for better understanding K-pop’s participatory culture that is largely reliant on digital media-driven, global fan bases. The following sections have a close look at particular examples of digital media-driven fan practices—reaction videos and dance cover videos. While these examples reveal the participatory aspects of global K-pop fan culture as an audience-driven, grassroots phenomenon, K-pop fan practices are not free of structural forces, such as social media’s technological structure and fans’ racial and ethnic positions. Thus, it is suggested in the last section of the chapter that K-pop fans are not a homogenous group, but their sociocultural backgrounds may influence the way they participate in the digital mediascape of K-pop.

## **Global K-pop and Its Fans**

There have been increasing discussions about how and why pop cultural forms of Korea—the country that was in the periphery of the global mediascape—have rapidly attracted global attention. The early Korean Wave in the 2000s, which was noticeable in Asian countries, was often explained by the probable cultural proximity between Asian consumers. The Confucianism-based cultural values, such as respect for elders and parents, and/or shared experiences of Asia’s modernization were identified as appealing factors of Korean popular culture, especially Korean TV dramas for Asian audiences (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Hogarth, 2013). In comparison, the recent Korean Wave, occurring since the early 2010s and represented by global K-pop fandom in not only Asia but also other regions, has often been attributed to the hybrid nature of the K-pop genre and its effective integration with social media environments beyond national and regional boundaries (Jin & Yoon, 2016; Lee & Nornes, 2015). Given the K-pop industry’s efforts to remix and rework Western pop music, the hybridity of K-pop may not be surprising.

However, questions remain regarding the nature of K-pop’s hybridity: Is it simply an inauthentic imitation of the hegemonic Western pop music (Jung, 2009; Unger, 2015)? Otherwise, does it imply “a potential node of cultural practice for new local identity formation” (Jin & Ryoo, 2014, p. 129)? For some, K-pop’s hybridity might be a reproduction of Western musical styles (e.g., Unger, 2015), while others might see the possibility of “a third space” in the recent Korean Wave, moving beyond the dichotomy between center and periphery in the hybrid cultural genre (e.g., Jin, 2016).<sup>3</sup>

While K-pop refers to a popular music genre (“pop”) by its name, this genre comprises more than musical components. Indeed, K-pop has been known for its “catchy tunes, good singing, attractive bodies, cool clothes, mesmerizing movements, and other attractive attributes, in a non-threatening, pleasant package” (Lie, 2012, p. 356). The fans who were interviewed for this chapter also described K-pop as “a package,” primarily due to its variety of content,<sup>4</sup> systematic production process, and visual aspect. According to one fan, “K-pop is an overall performance package because there’s so much that goes into it” (Jamie, 23 years old), while another stated, “K-pop is well packaged. It’s an actual package because it has a training system going on, where pop music talents are trained for a long time” (Anne, 20 years old). K-pop was perceived as a package because of its visualized music: “You can distinguish K-pop [from other pop music]

even without hearing the sound, because of the appearance [of K-pop idols], the fashion, the makeup, and the hairstyle . . . those are the whole package” (Carole, 20 years old). Additionally, it was stated that “if the package is pretty, why not look at it and wanna look at what’s inside? So, yeah (laughs). I’m pretty positive [about K-pop’s emphasis on look] (laughs)” (Nadia, 20 years old).

K-pop as a “package” has appealed to young audiences from different cultural backgrounds. For example, empirical studies in North America have identified ethnic minorities (diasporic youth of Asian heritage in particular) as the core fans of K-pop in the region (Park, 2013; Yoon, 2017; Yoon & Jin, 2016).<sup>5</sup> In the field studies conducted for this chapter, this demographic certainly constituted the core of K-pop fandom in Canada (Yoon & Jin, 2016); however, there were a noticeable number of non-Asian participants (including 11 White participants), which constituted over 20% of the total research participants. The Asian and non-Asian fans can be understood through Jenkins, Ford, and Green’s (2013) framework of two key audience groups in transnational media circulation: (a) “diasporic audiences” (or “immigrants”), who transnationally consume the media of their origin (rather than that of the host society) and potentially act as “proselytizers” and (b) “pop cosmopolitans,” who seek other cultural content beyond the boundaries of their own cultures.<sup>6</sup> According to this framework, diasporic media forms, such as Bollywood cinema, tend to be consumed primarily within diasporic communities, rather than by “pop cosmopolitans” (i.e., those who are not diasporic/immigrant audiences). In comparison, when certain transnational media forms, such as Japanese animation, are disseminated overseas, they attract dedicated “pop cosmopolitan” audiences, who have neither diasporic nor ethnic connections with the media forms they consume. Based on this cosmopolitan consumption pattern, transnational media forms are enjoyed without the cultural “odor” of the place of origin (Iwabuchi, 2002) or otherwise in a fetishized way through which the place of origin is stereotyped or fantasized (Jenkins et al., 2013).

The two categories can be applied to K-pop fandom in Canada, and interestingly, regarding K-pop fan bases in Canada, the two audience groups are not mutually exclusive and have both contributed to the global circulation of K-pop. It may be true that the earlier transnational flows of Korean popular culture were led by “diasporic” fans—that is, Asia-based fans or overseas fans of Asian descent. In the phase of diasporic consumption of K-pop, the cultural genre and its artists were often stereotyped or racialized by mainstream (non-diasporic) audiences. For example, when the K-pop superstar BoA showcased her US debut single in 2009, the *LA Times* described the native Korean star as “the heavily accented singer” (Amter, 2009). The American media’s unfavorable responses to BoA’s “accented” English may partly explain the Asian superstar’s failure to penetrate the US market (Shin, 2013).<sup>7</sup>

However, the recent phase of the Korean Wave, often represented by enthusiastic young fans of Asian heritage and non-Asian heritage, appears to be moving beyond racial and cultural divides while exploring networked fans through social media. K-pop’s language barriers and “accents” have been reduced through fans’ networked consumption, which is facilitated by various digital and social media platforms. Canada-based fans in the study accessed information about K-pop idols through several English K-pop websites, such as allkpop.com and soompi.com, and social media, such as Twitter and Facebook. As Marianne, a 20-year-old fan in Toronto, pointed out, social media were frequently used for global *and* local fan networking:

Twitter is the biggest way to find other international fans or people that are in Toronto. You guys can just go to events. If there's a Pop! Goes the World! [i.e., a Toronto-based K-pop event agency] event in Toronto and it is advertised on Facebook and Twitter. So, people just go together. (...) I started getting into K-pop through my friends who already had Twitter [i.e., a Twitter account]. When I followed them, I realized that I got updates on different artists and groups. So, I got to know K-pop artists. If I tweeted about a K-pop group, someone would follow me (laughs). And, after that, we would just talk [on Twitter] and would realize "Oh, look! We're both in Toronto!"

Locally *and* globally networked K-pop fans also were collaboratively immersed in the "universe" of their favorite K-pop idols.<sup>8</sup> As evidenced by BTS's "Love Yourself" campaign, K-pop idols encouraged their fans to participate in the K-pop universe, in which young people from different sociocultural backgrounds actualize themselves and share the feeling of growing up together. Moreover, digital media-driven, networked, and participatory consumption may significantly contribute to the inclusive universe of K-pop. The young fans in this study felt related to K-pop idols who were in their late teens or early twenties, as they share similar experiences regarding the struggle of transitioning to adulthood. Idols' extensive use of social media enables their fans to feel connected to them, as well as to other fans. For example, BTS's online channels on YouTube and V Live (Korean-based interactive application) connect the group's global fans by webcasting BTS members' everyday lives, thoughts, and music. BTS has also benefited from its dedicated fans who have contributed to different translations (primarily through fansubbing practices) on the social mediascape of K-pop. The fans' participatory culture lowers the linguistic barriers and has, thus, attracted an increasing number of "pop cosmopolitans" to this new cultural genre. BTS has made continuous efforts to construct its performance and communication as a series of storytelling for the sake of their young fans. As Sugar, a BTS member, aptly summarized in an interview, BTS sings "what other people were feeling—like pain, anxieties and worries," and the group's goal is "to create this empathy that people can relate to" (Bruner, 2018, para. 6). Sharing the feeling of youthful struggles and showing efforts to cope with the struggles were highly appealing to the BTS fans in the study. Jane, a 20-year-old BTS fan, noted,

BTS had the *Most Beautiful Moment in Life* trilogy [i.e., the compilation album by BTS released in 2016], and this whole story is about growing up and you would follow that. It's something that I find really interesting. And it has the continuation through one music video to another. One ends and the next music video is related to that last one. I like that there's a storyline to a music video.

In this manner, by participating in the imagined community of the K-pop universe, global fans might experience—at least temporarily—a sense of transcending their differences related to race, ethnicity, class, language, and age. As shown by BTS and its fan base ARMY, the K-pop universe expands through digital storytelling, which is facilitated by the process of digital media convergence.

## **Media Convergence from Above and Below**

The global rise of K-pop vividly shows dimensions of media convergence as "an ongoing process occurring at various intersections between media technologies, industries, content, and audiences" (Jenkins, 2004, p. 154). In the global circulation of K-pop, media convergence occurs from above and below. On the one hand, the K-pop industry has exploited different media

platforms to “package” its content by means of a process referred to as “corporate convergence” (Jenkins, 2006). On the other hand, the fans appropriate different media platforms for cultural consumption and participation by means of “grassroots convergence” (Jenkins, 2004).

K-pop is a cultural genre that has exploited social media extensively and has been customized for the emerging social media-driven cultural environment, which has been referred to as the “social mediascape” by Jin and Yoon (2016). K-pop may not yet be a globally dominant music genre in terms of conventional market measurements, such as song and album sales. However, the ability of major K-pop groups to penetrate the social mediascape has been remarkable. If measured by constant and intensive fan engagement (i.e., how often fans interact with an artist’s social media account), rather than by simply following or clicking on social media, leading K-pop idol groups attract an exceptional number of social media mentions. For example, BTS had 61M Twitter mentions for 13M followers in a week of March, 2018, which “would look like every other artist in the world is failing to perform well on Twitter” (Benatar, Hughes, & Zee, para. 14).

The K-pop phenomenon has largely benefited from the industry’s “corporate convergence”—that is, the vertical and horizontal concentrations of resources for production and distribution through its own packaging system (also known as the “in-house system”). The major K-pop corporations (known as the Big 3: SM, YG, and JYP Entertainment) have developed the “in-house” process of talent recruitment, training, marketing, music production, dissemination, and management. Media platforms play a key role in this vertical concentration, as evidenced by numerous reality audition shows, such as K-pop Star (2011–2017), Sixteen (2015), and Produce 101 (2016–), through which the entertainment companies form and promote their new idol groups. Meanwhile, K-pop promotion and dissemination have been strengthened by the industry’s alliance with different media channels. In particular, YouTube has been essential to the circulation of K-pop on a global scale. Reportedly, over 90% of K-pop content on YouTube is consumed outside Korea (G. T. Lee, 2014). YouTube provides global audiences with convenient environments for accessing transnational media through its subtitles, automatic captions through speech recognition, and viewer comments and interactions (Jin, 2016, pp. 121–122). To overcome the initial lack of a solid offline infrastructure to enable the transnational dissemination of K-pop content, the K-pop industry quickly developed a new social media-based revenue model that bypasses traditional gatekeepers, such as broadcast media platforms. The industry has focused on viewers’ attention on YouTube rather than on the sale of physical and digital materials, such as compact discs and files (Oh & Park, 2012). Major K-pop management companies marketize their idols through different platforms and versify their profit by extensively exploiting the appealing images of idols—for example, idols’ endorsement deals with major companies, event performances, and merchandises including character goods (Oh, 2018). Reliant on transmedia convergence, this revenue model has contributed to the effective global circulation of K-pop videos by allowing fans worldwide to conveniently access, share, and recreate them.<sup>9</sup> The visual consumption of K-pop not only entails activities on social media. The appealing visual aspect of K-pop but also facilitates a range of fan activities to “experience” K-pop, such as fan pilgrimages to Seoul, the “K-pop city” (Oh, 2018).

The K-pop industry’s deployment of digital platforms and early adoption of the business-to-business model, which is reliant on the profits generated by advertisements and the extensive release of free content on social media, have turned out to be successful strategies overall (Oh & Park, 2012). It is not only the K-pop industry but also the global platform provider YouTube that

benefits from K-pop's revenue model through advertising on social media. Regarding the circulation of K-pop content on YouTube, the platform provider's profit share is much larger than that of the content provider—K-pop companies (Oh & Park, 2012). For this reason, seven major K-pop companies launched Music and Creative Partners Asia Ltd. (MCPA) in July 2018. According to its press release, MCPA aims to negotiate K-pop music videos' global distribution on YouTube and other global digital service platforms and to provide new platform services for K-pop video distribution. This project is known as the Korean counterpart to Vevo, which streams the music videos of three participating companies via its own site and YouTube, both of which share advertising and other profits (Milman, 2018).

As shown in MCPA's response to YouTube, the K-pop industry has not been exclusively reliant on global platforms for its worldwide reach. K-pop content producers have formed an alliance with Korean-based digital platforms. In particular, Korean-based platforms, such as Korean information technology (IT) giant Naver's V Live application (app), have helped facilitate transmedia digital storytelling practices, such as K-pop idols' personal broadcasts and their fans' video culture. Launched in 2015, the V Live app streams K-pop stars' personal live videos through an intimate and interactive format. The app, which offers foreign language support, has been especially popular among overseas fans who seek real-time communication with their Korean-based idols.<sup>10</sup> As exemplified by V Live's successful integration into K-pop fan bases, the K-pop industry has deployed different digital media platforms and technologies, including US-based global platforms—such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter—and Korean-based platforms—such as KakaoTalk, LINE, and V Live.

It is undeniable that global platforms, such as YouTube and Twitter, are far more influential than Korean-based platforms in the transnational social mediascape of K-pop. While K-pop's global social media platforms have contributed to spreading K-pop as a global youth cultural form, this process involves probable adverse effects on the ways in which cultural content is created and consumed. The global platforms not only enable “free” access but also restrict the expansion of local platforms and production companies; moreover, the global platforms might frame the ways in which fans interact with cultural texts. The dominant social media platforms are managed primarily by a few US-based global giant companies, which have become even bigger through continuous integration (e.g., mergers and acquisitions). Jin (2015) referred to major platform providers' tendency to dominate the platform media market as “platform imperialism.” According to his argument, social and digital media do not necessarily provide opportunities for local industries and users, but they reinforce the existing economic and technological inequalities between Western and non-Western regions. Furthermore, platforms influence how users behave and appropriate content; for example, fans' methods of communicating with their stars and other fans are largely influenced by the technological affordances allowed by particular platforms. As boyd (2014) suggested, the dominant social media platforms have particular technological affordances, through which users' media consumption is framed. As discussed later in this chapter, K-pop fans' participation and user-generated content are not free of the design and structure of the media platforms they use. In particular, social media platforms engage with the commodification of user experiences and content by drawing on the interactive processes of users' participation as a source of revenue.

Although top-down media convergence (“corporate convergence”), which has been accelerated by media corporations (e.g., the K-pop music industry, IT industries, and global platform giants,

such as Google), and particular technological affordances contribute to the rapid diffusion of K-pop on a global scale, the K-pop phenomenon would not have been possible without “grassroots convergence”—that is, global fans’ active use of social media to translate, share, and recreate content. In particular, global fans’ access to and engagement with K-pop across different media outlets, such as YouTube, Twitter, V Live, and fan sites, reveal how corporate convergence may be negotiated from below. K-pop fans do not simply consume ready-made content but, rather, actively *react* to and eventually *produce* content. For example, K-pop fans have utilized YouTube as their platform for sharing fan-generated content, such as fans’ (a) editing of televised K-pop shows, (b) filming of K-pop stage performances (using their own video recorders or cell phones), (c) reactions to K-pop videos (“reaction videos”), and (d) “dance cover videos” (G. T. Lee, 2014).

Hugo, a 20-year-old fan, described how he accessed and enjoyed K-pop with others on social media:

We share [information about] many different concerts and events that are happening here and especially if someone has a dance cover video or we love to share– [the video]. (...) I use Facebook Messenger a lot when something catches my ear or something new comes out. Especially with the YouTube group, I’m always like, “Yo, guys, check out this new video. We have to react to this.”

K-pop fan activities are accompanied by networked consumption, which has also been referred to as “connected viewing” (Holt & Sanson, 2014), through which audience members are constantly connected with others via media platforms, and sharing content and information is not strictly controlled by institutionalized gatekeepers. Streaming sites have incorporated fan practices of connected viewing into their core interfaces. For example, the video streaming site Viki,<sup>11</sup> which specializes in Korean and East Asian content, shows the articulation of fans’ participation and media corporations in the networked consumption of K-pop and the Korean Wave. Viki has effectively incorporated some of the fan-ish elements of file sharing, chatting, and interacting with other viewers online, as well as crowdsourced translations; thus, fans’ participation is encouraged. Viki’s interface design “solicits translation from the crowd yet offers multiple forums for community discussion and engagement, and encourages users to suggest new content, advocate for subtitles in their own language and self-organise subbing groups” (Dwyer, 2016, para. 2).

K-pop fan culture, which facilitates and is facilitated by grassroots convergence, blurs the boundaries between production and consumption. Equipped with mobile, ubiquitous, and mundane media technologies that allow for easy access and production, global fans enjoy K-pop through networked and producerly consumption. In particular, due to the digital media environments surrounding K-pop and the Korean Wave, overseas fans seem to easily interact with stars and other fans. Hilda, a 19-year-old fan in Vancouver, described how she took part in K-pop culture:

There was a chance for international fans to write a message for their idol or trainee on *Produce 101* [i.e., on the web forum for the reality audition program *Produce 101*]. And then, someone would put them together and translate them or keep them in English and then give them to the idols. There are obviously a lot of ways that fans can participate.



Not surprisingly, fansubbing is an important component of the global flows of K-pop. For K-pop music videos, equipped with production companies' official translations of the Korean lyrics, the official translations are limited to particularly popular songs and certain languages, such as English. Thus, bilingual fans contribute to fansubbing communities by offering their labor.

Moreover, user-generated videos have been popular forms of K-pop fan culture, in which fans not only consume but also actively interpret the content. Global K-pop fans are known for user-generated content, via which they express their feelings and share their thoughts with other K-pop fans. YouTubers' reactions to Psy's "Gangnam Style" video in 2012 were an early example of the vibrant K-pop fan video culture. When this Korean music video went viral, overseas YouTubers increasingly shot and uploaded their reactions to the original video primarily on YouTube while producing their own localized versions of OO (name of their own location) style—that is, dance covers and reactions. "Gangnam Style" fan videos show how global audiences express their emotional responses to and curiosity about the foreign content on YouTube. Among different forms of fan activities, making and sharing reaction videos and dance cover videos are particularly vivid examples of K-pop's fan culture. As Cho (2017) stated, K-pop fans' video culture is "a sign of a 'reactive' impetus in global K-pop reception, to assert that K-pop is less a pop-music genre than a performance culture" (p. 241). To examine the cultural meanings of fans' participation in K-pop culture through user-generated content, particular examples of reaction videos and dance cover videos will be discussed in the following two sections.

## **The Reaction Video Culture**

Reaction videos have been rapidly integrated into K-pop's global fan communities for several reasons.<sup>12</sup> First, K-pop is an audiovisual genre that has been customized for YouTube and other social media platforms. Popular K-pop groups tend to promote their catchy songs in compact three- to five-minute music videos, which are often colorful and visually appealing. For K-pop musicians and producers who have no solid distribution channels in Western mainstream media industries, their global penetration has relied on YouTube's attention economy. As evidenced by BTS's global success, extensive and intensive integration into social media environments has been a particularly important component of K-pop's global distribution. The K-pop industry has developed its revenue model, which increasingly draws on YouTube viewing and related profits rather than content sales (Oh & Park, 2012). As a YouTube-customized music genre, K-pop has attracted enthusiastic audiences on YouTube and social media.

Second, as K-pop is a relatively new kind of music and is written in Korean, overseas fans want to talk and learn more about the context and content of its music videos. Regarding transnational and cross-cultural efforts to make sense of the foreign music form, YouTube and other social media platforms have been effective tools used by overseas fans to share their first impressions and interpretations of new K-pop music videos and know about others' thoughts on the new videos. By watching other fans' reaction videos, overseas fans know how others might think about and respond to particular K-pop music videos in which they are interested (Cho, 2017).

K-pop reaction videos reveal reactors' desires to watch (K-pop stars) and be watched (by other fans). Y. Kim (2015) pointed out succinctly the reactor's double role in regard to reaction videos—that is, the consumer, who assumes "the reactive position of appreciating the ready-

made visual product,” and the producer, who “makes and distributes self-reactive images” (p. 333).

While some reaction videos use advanced visual effects, most do not adopt particularly sophisticated production techniques; many comprise medium, close-up, or long-take shots of reactors’ facial expressions and the narrations of their responses to K-pop music videos. Normally shot in front of the reactor’s couch or desk, reaction videos prove that YouTube and other social media significantly lower the barrier of audiences’ reworking of original cultural texts, as fans can easily upload and circulate their own video commentaries or reaction videos without having high level of digital media literacy.

Reaction videos largely comprise three parts: introduction (i.e., the part shot before the music video is played), reaction to the music video that is under examination (i.e., the part shot while the music video is being played), and the overall evaluation of the music video (i.e., the part shot after the music video is played) (Y. Kim, 2015). However, the simplicity of reaction videos in terms of their formats and narratives does not mean that they have no aesthetic value. As Y. Kim (2015) pointed out, reaction videos have their own aesthetics, such as ordinariness, naturalness, and self-immersion, and are produced and consumed in “ordinary people’s everyday life and their habitual behaviors” (p. 337) while showing people’s natural states and immersion in their own interiority in the process of watching K-pop videos.<sup>13</sup>

The practice of making and uploading reaction videos is often motivated by the fun derived from playful interactions with close peers and other fans. A few of the fans who were interviewed for this chapter had made and uploaded reaction videos. Initially, they were motivated by the pleasure of making funny videos, and then their continued production was encouraged by the increasing attention they received from other fans. For example, Adam, a 20-year-old student in Toronto, was a “micro-celebrity” YouTuber known for his K-pop reaction videos:

(Interviewer: What made you start reaction videos?) Some people say I’m funny. I don’t know why (laughs). Uh, my friend was like, “Oh, I think you should do reaction videos.” And I was like, “Okay. I’ll try it.” So, I sent her a few reaction videos that I didn’t publish on YouTube. And she was like, “Oh my God! This is so funny!” which brought to my mind that maybe I could keep doing this. Maybe I could make other people laugh—not just this person. So, that’s what happened. That’s how I started.

Reaction videos are appealing to K-pop fans for several reasons. First of all, the videos are viewed because they are entertaining. For the viewers/fans (i.e., those who do not record their own reaction videos but enjoy watching others’ reactions), reaction videos have additional functions—to make sense of the content and context of original K-pop video text, experience sameness by sharing similar reactions, and accumulate fan knowledge through “micro-celebrity” fans’ reviews and recommendations.

By watching others watching K-pop music videos, overseas K-pop fans who do not understand the Korean language attempt to figure out the meanings and narratives of the videos. According to Alice (17 years old), K-pop videos tend to have complex narratives and many idol members in one short video; thus, she sometimes refers to K-pop fan vloggers’ reaction videos for a better understanding of particular new videos:

I watch reaction videos. (. . .) Because there are too many people in an idol group, I feel like, *Okay, but is there too much going on?* It's mostly like, *I like the beat, I like how catchy it is, and I like how they dance; it's so cool.* But then, there's just too much visually within the music video. (. . .) Because I have only one friend to share my feelings [about K-pop] with [in real life], watching other people react [helps me see] if they react the same. Then, I'll be like, *Oh! Someone else likes this too.* And there are really funny people on reaction channels, so . . . it's just entertainment basically.

Moreover, by watching others' reactions, fans affirm that their reactions differ only minimally from others'. According to Nora, a 19-year-old fan, "How they [reactors] are reacting, their facial expressions and stuff like that, is what I actually do when I watch [K-pop videos]." This feeling of sameness regarding reactions to K-pop music videos was also provided as a reason for watching reaction videos. For example, Hilda (19 years old) stated the following:

Reaction videos are fun to watch because if I'm really into this one music video, and I want to hear other people's opinions about it, I might watch one person's reaction. I kind of want other people to feel the same way I do about this K-pop idol; so, that's why I watch them.

By watching other fans watching and reacting to K-pop videos, K-pop fans may allow themselves "to experience, at a time of increasing cultural difference, the comforting universality of human nature" through "a comforting restoration of order and unity" (Anderson, 2011, para. 14).

Furthermore, reaction videos produced by "micro-celebrity" fans can help fan viewers better understand various K-pop videos. As Carole, a 20-year-old fan in Vancouver, noted, famous YouTuber fans play the role of reviewers, which differs little from that of professional film or music reviewers:

Lately, too many groups are appearing, and the majority of reaction videos are made by people who dedicate themselves to doing reaction videos. They tend to choose different kinds of . . . well, actually all the new groups, and they suggest groups [to pay attention to]. They introduce new songs coming out.

The reaction video facilitates the networked consumption of the transnational cultural text (K-pop) and potentially contributes to intercultural communication. As Swan (2018) pointed out, the reaction video is an "integration of reactive dialogue, emotional gasps, and conversation that encourages the participation of other fans" (p. 13).

While the reaction video is often considered an example of K-pop's participatory culture, it has been viewed skeptically by some critics and fans. Cho (2017) pointed out that the reaction video culture may reinforce a standardized and homogenized mode of human reactions. Reaction videos' format and aesthetics, which can be summarized as "ordinary" viewers' "natural" responses, are often conventional and manufactured. To some extent, viewers learn *how to react* by watching reaction videos. These videos may reproduce "the form of voluntary activeness to be reactive" (Y. Kim, 2015, p. 339) and may commodify being reactive. By watching others watching, fans are encouraged to feel, react, and translate a text in the way that other fans (reactors) do. The reaction video may narrowly frame the way in which a transnational cultural form is translated in different cultural contexts. Moreover, some Western "micro-celebrity" YouTubers exude Oriental exoticism. As Oh's (2017) analysis illustrated with regard to K-pop, White YouTubers' reaction videos reveal to some extent the liberatory potential of cultural

hybridity but also unveil White fans' power to fetishize non-Western cultural texts and to rework the dominant racial order.

Skeptical views regarding the reaction video culture were also evident among several fans who were interviewed for this chapter. Whereas some fans enjoyed uploading or watching reaction videos, others did not necessarily appreciate the reaction videos as a core fan activity. According to the skeptics, reaction videos reproduce stereotypes of K-pop and its fans. In particular, as Florence, a 21-year-old fan who is of Chinese heritage, noted, some Westerners' reaction videos reveal cultural misunderstandings: "It's very interesting to me to see the reaction of Westernized people, and most of them are like, 'Wow, this is really really strange.'" In this regard, several fans viewed some reaction videos as childish and even offensive rather than as representing cultural diversity regarding the reception of K-pop. These critical views reveal that the practice of making reaction videos may not always contribute to the participatory fan culture; rather, depending on *who reacts* and *how to react*, the reaction video culture may imply different meanings.

## **Dance Covers and the Video Culture**

K-pop is circulated globally in the form of compact three- to five-minute videos, which are often freely available on social media platforms. The idols' collective choreographies, presented in colorful music videos, have contributed to K-pop's transnational appeal. By performing ("covering") the dance moves, global fans identify with, and embody their dedication to, the idols while attracting their own audiences. Fans' dance covers refer to dances that imitate the original artists' choreography. Fans' efforts to copy their idols' dance moves have been an important component of the K-pop fan culture (Billboard, 2011). The fans who were interviewed for this chapter indicated that they tended to enjoy the dance cover culture as dancers and/or viewers. Dance cover videos show a facet of the participatory K-pop fan culture, in which collaborative performance is digitally archived and shared. Young fans imitate, adjust, and appropriate original K-pop music videos and, thus, localize K-pop as an embodied cultural form. However, the cover dancers may not be free of the ongoing commodification of K-pop, through which audiences' performance and participation are incorporated into the circuit of K-pop as a commodity form.

K-pop is often recognized by its signature dance moves. According to the fans who were interviewed for this chapter, it was K-pop's choreography that initially attracted them to the genre. Olivia, a 19-year-old fan, described how her friends danced to K-pop: "There were a lot of people in high school who were really strong K-pop fans, and there were all kinds of people would just dance to it [a K-pop song], like 'Fantastic Baby,' just because it's really catchy." As 28-year-old Vancouver-based fan Cora noted, K-pop seemed to be integrated into the urban club culture:

In Vancouver, there's a "Soju [i.e., a popular Korean liquor] Sunday," where they book a club on Sundays on a long weekend to play K-pop, and there are dance covers. Dance groups come and perform, too. And that's a lot of fun. (. . .) I love watching dance covers that people do, and I follow a couple of different dance crews that are here. They make videos and stuff like that. Sometimes, they react to the music videos, too, before they cover them.

Some fans learned to perform original K-pop dances by watching and analyzing K-pop music videos. By making and uploading dance cover videos, amateur fan dancers make an effort to improve their performances and present them to other fans and the public via social media platforms. Thus, once a new K-pop music video is released, K-pop cover dancers begin to exercise while aiming to perform the original choreography as accurately as possible. Once they are confident about their performances, they may record their dance moves in locations such as studios, public places, and even their bedrooms. Dance covering is a process involving fans' embodied participation in their K-pop idols' choreographic worlds. Cover dancing fans are highly committed and emotionally attached to the idols (groups) they replicate, and "the potency of the performance comes from the perfection of the dance and the precision in personifying the star" (Kang, 2014, p. 566). Some cover dancers attract their own fans and perform at events, becoming "micro-celebrities" or "demi-idols" in their own right (Kang, 2014). Popular cover groups even created "a cottage industry selling prints, T-shirts, hats, and other fan paraphernalia" (Kang, 2014, p. 566).

The aesthetics of dance cover videos focuses on their similarity to original K-pop videos, primarily in regard to gestures, choreography, and costumes (Kang, 2014). Some dance cover videos are filmed in a way that imitates the original K-pop music video texts in terms of camera movements and mise-en-scènes. The cover dancers' efforts to imitate the original dances and texts can be considered a form of mimicry, in which certain hybrid effects and meanings are generated intentionally or unintentionally. As postcolonial theory suggests, the term *mimicry* implies the political effects of colonial subjects. According to Bhabha (1994), colonial mimicry is "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (italics in original, p. 122). Dance cover videos reveal not only fans' desires to imitate the originals but also their (in)ability to do so identically.

Although dance cover videos imitate original K-pop music videos, amateur videos are inevitably different from the originals. Fans' dance cover videos often reveal their localities, which are contrasted with those of their original counterparts. With some exceptions, such as Psy's "Gangnam Style" and TWICE's "Likey," K-pop music videos are often shot in highly staged studio environments, and locations, therefore, remain unrecognizable (Liew, 2013). Common K-pop dance cover videos are simply shot in studios, where fans practice their dance moves, or in public places; however, even when filmed in a studio, a fan dance video does not completely remove the local atmosphere of the particular studio. Fans' dance cover videos tend to reveal "undecorated actual space instead of the staged elaborate settings of mainstream music videos" (Liew, 2013, p. 171). Additionally, some fan videos are set in public spaces in front of anonymous, pedestrian audiences. In such cases, the K-pop fans show not only their local contexts but also their creative engagement in public spaces, which function as the stage of their corporeal movements and collaboration. The fans re-signify public locations, which would otherwise remain distant to them.

Many K-pop dance cover videos also present corporeal movements that may not coincide with the K-pop idols' narrowly defined standards of beauty. Liew (2013) claimed the following:

From the intimate space of the bedrooms and living rooms to the dance studios and public arenas, the most striking deviation of the mirror dances from the artistes that they are following lies in the fan-performers' deeper sense of place and body.

In addition to showing fans' dedication and efforts to imitate K-pop idols, dance cover videos reveal moments of hybridity or mimicry. For example, shortly after the release of K-pop girl group TWICE's "Likey" music video (2017), which was shot entirely in Vancouver, several fan groups uploaded their dance cover videos that were shot in several locations that appeared in the original video. They clearly imitated the choreography of the original music video and presented nine members—the number of members in TWICE.

However, the fans had some changes of the original video by including behind-the-scenes segments, flash mobs in public spaces, and/or male performers. For example, Vancouver-based Flying Dancing Studio's fan dance cover video imitates the original "Likey" video, as nine East Asian-looking young women perform in several Vancouver locations that were featured in the original video. In this video, which was uploaded only seven days after the release of the original, the fan dancers imitate the choreography and atmosphere of the original as closely as possible. On the same day, K-City, a Vancouver-based dance cover group, also uploaded a "Likey" cover video. While Flying Dance Studio's video presented young Asian women, the dancers in the K-City video were relatively mixed in terms of gender (including two male members) and ethnicity (including several non-East Asian-looking members). Moreover, as K-pop idol groups are typically composed of many members (four or more), dance cover groups tend to have the same number of members as the original K-pop groups they cover. Thus, dance cover groups sometimes need to collaborate with other cover dancers or groups to make up for any shortages in this regard. For example, K-City's "Likey" video is based on the group's collaborative performance with other K-pop dance teams. In this manner, K-pop cover dancers often work collaboratively, sharing their feelings and corporeal movements.

K-pop cover dancers also perform in public places or clubs, thereby exposing the public to K-pop. Jamie, a K-pop fan and cover dancer in Vancouver, recalled being introduced to K-pop in a flash mob and later learning the dance moves through YouTube:

In the summer of 2011, a big K-pop flash mob happened in Granville [the entertainment district of downtown Vancouver]. My friends wanted to participate in it, and this was when I had no idea what K-pop was. They said, "You know, we really want to do this, but we can't learn to dance off of YouTube. So, you should learn it, then you should teach us." Then I was like, "OK. I like you guys. I like dancing. I'll give this a shot." And that's when the whole thing just snowballed. And I started. That was my first experience learning dances off a computer.

Cover dancers perform as groups and/or do flash mobs in public places. In so doing, K-pop transforms public spaces into young people's symbolic territories, which would otherwise have remained distant to them. The fans' corporeal movements are also recorded for other fans and anonymous others. For example, "random dance cover games" are playful flash mob-style dance events that are popular among K-pop fans. This dance cover format allows participants to dance to random mixes of different K-pop songs in public places while replicating particular songs' signature choreography. Anyone can join and dance to each segment, as there is a short break (three to five seconds) between each segment. Random dance cover games tend to be performed in public places, such as shopping malls, public squares, and KCON. The way in which fans use technology and public spaces can be analyzed based on Molnár's (2014) study: "Flash mobs illuminate how everyday technological tools can be used ingeniously to create urban

interventions, to break the routine of the everyday, by reframing public space around unexpected outbursts of sociability” (p. 55).

Popular cover dancers often shoot different versions of cover songs and dance in different locations, such as public places and studios. They also upload tutorial videos to help other fans learn how to dance. This culture of sharing and mutual learning invites more and more young people to *do* (i.e., embody and perform) K-pop. Sasha, a 21-year-old fan who enjoys dance covers, noted,

It’s just easy to follow, and because there are so many YouTube tutorials online showing how to do Korean girl group dances, it’s very easy for anybody to follow along. So, I sang, and my friends did the girl group dances.

Similar to K-pop reaction videos, dance cover videos show how global K-pop fan activities are heavily mediated and rely on digital media. Fans learn how to dance by watching music videos and other fans’ dance tutorials (Kang, 2014). Dance cover videos reveal how fans accelerate translational cultural flows through the creative appropriation of different digital and social media platforms. Fans make use of corporate social media platforms, such as YouTube, to re-localize overseas cultural texts and globally share fan-generated content. Cover dancers’ playful performances and videos, circulated on social media and beyond linguistic and cultural barriers, vividly illustrate the transnationalization of a Korean youth cultural form. The young people’s bodily engagement with K-pop reveals how global youth localize and appropriate this cultural form rather than repetitively and passively consume it.

However, the culture of K-pop dance cover videos may not be free of the commodification of user-generated content and fans’ labor (De Kosnik, 2013); by “covering” and referring to the original text/commodity, fans might contribute to attracting attention to it. The fan-generated content of dance cover videos serves the attention economy of K-pop on social media. In particular, media platform providers, such as YouTube, and the K-pop industry (the production companies of original K-pop music videos) benefit from a wide range of online fan activities, from uploading user-generated content to clicking on likes. Arguably, K-pop fans’ “free labor” is not necessarily rewarded but eventually contributes to the reproduction and growth of digital capitalism (Y. Kim, 2015). For example, a Korean network TV channel, JTBC, recently launched the reality TV show *Stage K* (2019), in which global K-pop cover dancers compete, and a final winner is given the opportunity to perform with K-pop idols. This example reveals how fans’ participatory culture is at least partly subject to, and in negotiation with, commodification forced by cultural industries.

## **Conclusion**

The Korean Wave has been deeply integrated into the digital mediascape, through which its transnational circulation is accelerated substantially. As illustrated in this chapter, young people who are surrounded by ubiquitous digital media forms access and engage in the global fandom of K-pop and, in so doing, generate a participatory culture in which consumers become “producers” (productive consumers) and explore their identities. K-pop fans’ media-making practices illustrate how transnational fans make sense of and use of the text originating in a distant cultural context. As shown in the case of reaction videos and cover dance videos, K-pop fans produce, share, watch, and comment on idols’ performance and other fans’ performances through social

media. The fans are seamlessly and constantly networked with other fans, while re-localizing the original texts.

By engaging with K-pop idols and other fans via different media forms, fans take part in transmedia storytelling and explore transnational imagination. As Jenkins (2006) suggested, media convergence facilitates not only the synergy of different media platforms and technologies but also the collaborative and networked methods of media creation and participatory culture, especially among young media users. In other words, in the era of digital and social media, media convergence is accelerated at the level of institution (“corporate convergence”), such as IT and media corporations, and simultaneously at the level of grassroots media users, artists, and activists (“grassroots convergence”).

In the process of media convergence, K-pop fandom has emerged as a new mode of transnational youth cultural form. According to the young fans’ accounts in the study, K-pop was considered as a cultural package that includes different cultural components. By engaging with this versatile cultural resource, the fans were globally *and* locally connected to the K-pop universe. Whereas the fans imagined an egalitarian K-pop community, the fans might not always go beyond their subject positions such as gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. The K-pop universe may be interpreted from many different perspectives. For example, “pop cosmopolitans” and “diasporic audiences” (Jenkins et al., 2013) might have different understandings or perspectives of K-pop. The diasporic audiences of Asian heritage have, to some extent, engaged with K-pop partly as a way to positively affirm their Asian identity (Yoon & Jin, 2016). In comparison, pop cosmopolitans, who were neither ethnically nor racially connected to the “K” in K-pop, seemed to be interested in K-pop owing to its difference from mainstream Western pop music. These differing perspectives of the pop cosmopolitans and diasporic audiences in this study resonate with Oh’s (2017) analysis of racial orders in the Western K-pop fan community: White fans might be in a racially privileged position consuming K-pop as a non-Western (often racialized) cultural form, whereas Asian Canadian fans relate to K-pop as a resource for their identity politics.

Digital and social media may not be free of the existing (offline) power relations between different audience groups (including fans and nonfans) of K-pop. For example, trolling on social media and online forums has increased the number of negative stereotypes about K-pop idols and fans. When the K-pop group Girls’ Generation won the Video of the Year award at the YouTube Awards in November 2013, a racist viral campaign built around the tag “Ching Chong Girls” was run against the group. The campaign was reportedly led by fans of White pop singers who were in competition with Girls’ Generation (Jakubowicz et al., 2017). The K-pop fans in the study were sometimes offended by anonymous others who stigmatize K-pop and its fans as “immature” and “Asian” or describe the phenomenon as an “Asian-fetishizing” cultural taste. The fans’ common responses to racist trolling or other forms of stigmatization of K-pop included “not coming out” (i.e., not publicly admitting their interest in and enthusiasm for K-pop), “ignoring the trolls,” and “seeking allied fans.” A few fans in the study fought back against trolls, rather than ignoring them or remaining silent. For example, Julia, a 19-year-old fan, consistently confronted those who teased K-pop fans online: “I’ve already fought so many people on Facebook about separate things [to do] with racism. I’ve already fought a ton of people (. . .). I’ve got into fights with lots of really White girls over [their] racism.” For Julia, the social and digital mediascape involves ongoing tensions between fans and nonfans, on the one



hand, and the racialization of non-Western music and its fans, on the other. Interestingly, Julia, who is a young White woman, assumed that “really White girls,” who are not fans, virtually attacked K-pop fans and that this trolling was racist in nature. Julia’s experience reveals that, despite digital media’s potential for inclusive cosmopolitanism, the digital mediascape of transnational cultural flows is affected by the existing power relations.

This chapter explored the digital media-driven mobility of a local form of youth culture on a global scale. As a transnational media practice, K-pop fandom shows how digital and social media shape a participatory youth culture that moves beyond the temporal, spatial, and financial limitations with which young people cope. By accessing and re-localizing K-pop at a low cost and without geographic restrictions, the fans experience a sense of belonging and growing up together. In so doing, they may potentially feel empowered (Grossberg, 1992). K-pop’s narrative of growing up together may serve to reproduce a particular mode of subjectivity, which idealizes self-regulated, self-developing, competitive, and young individuals (G. Kim, 2019; Y. Kim, 2011; Yoon, 2017). As Y. Oh (2018) aptly described, what K-pop’s youthful narratives imply may be “the neoliberal enforcement of the refined body and the commodification of youth” (p. 134). Moreover, S. Y. Kim (2018) argued that K-pop fans’ sense of togetherness might be an ideological and technological effect of liveness, which is digitally enhanced and involves dualistic meanings—the illusion of intimacy and a sense of community.

While the K-pop industry may produce and reproduce competitive idols oriented toward neoliberal subjectivity, this does not necessarily mean that the fans conform to the dominant neoliberal ideology. Popular cultural forms are always decoded and re-signified by its audiences of different socio-cultural positions. K-pop can be reappropriated by young people to question the dominant social order. For example, “Into the New World,” a song by the popular K-pop girl group Girls’ Generation, was sung by a group of Ewha Womans University students in Seoul in 2017 during their protest against undemocratic school administration. Earlier, the prestigious private university announced the establishment of a new degree-granting college without consultation with the student body; this protest incidentally publicized the involved university executives’ corruption, which later turned out to be a part of a larger political corruption, and then ignited nation-wide “candlelight” protests to impeach the president (Lee, 2017). The students’ appropriation of a song by the K-pop group that is considered a highly commercial, girlish group reveals how K-pop as a commodity form can be re-signified by its audiences and thus, meaningfully incorporated into young people’s social engagement.<sup>14</sup>

As Sandvoss (2005) argued, the “particular affection of the object of fandom” bridges “the fan’s self and the object world” and operates as “a meaningful device in integrating internal and external reality” (p. 161). As vividly shown in this chapter, the global K-pop phenomenon has engaged with corporate and grassroots processes of digital media convergence, in which fans negotiate structural forces, such as corporations’ commodification of fan culture. Global fans’ reflexive engagement with K-pop may show how young people are growing up along with popular culture and digital media across geocultural boundaries.

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<sup>1</sup> The plagiarism of foreign media content and its format has been reported not only in Korea but also in other Asian countries. According to a recent report, many Korean TV shows have increasingly been copied without proper license agreements by numerous Asian media productions and repackaged as if they were original programs (The Chosun Ilbo, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> While K-pop music videos on social media and YouTube are typically free in the sense that users do not have to pay for content, audiences have to provide their attention, data, and information in return. For a comprehensive discussion of audiences' consumption as labor, see McGuigan and Manzerolle (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Either way, K-pop has been considered a new breed of cultural commodity developed in relation to the influence of Western popular culture, as evidenced by the Korean music industry's increasing contracts with American composers and producers, as well as the trend of including English lyrics in numerous K-pop songs (Jin & Ryoo, 2014). In addition to Western influences on K-pop, Japanese pop music (J-pop)'s influences were also noted by a few K-pop fans in the study. Several K-pop fans who were interviewed for this chapter were familiar with J-pop and compared K-pop and J-pop. According to their evaluations, J-pop did not sound “universal” or was “way too cute” (Maya, 18 years old). In addition, J-pop songs and music videos were deemed less available than K-pop ones, which were widely available on social media platforms. Consequently, J-pop seemed to appeal to particular demographics of domestic and international fans, while K-pop was considered to have the potential to be spread globally.

<sup>4</sup> In particular, K-pop idols are more than singers; they often appear in different cultural genres, such as variety shows, TV dramas, films, and TV commercial. Due to the nature of K-pop idols as “one source multi-use content,” as promoted by the Korean cultural industries, they play a role as transmedia storytellers across different media platforms and forms (Shin, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> By comparison, Latin American case studies have found that the young members of lower-income families constitute the main fan base (Carranza Ko, Kim, & Simoes, 2014; Min, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Despite the convenience and simplicity of their comparison, these two categories may need to be applied carefully. Otherwise, various people of color can be simply reduced to the category of “immigrants,” while White people or those who are not minorities are contrastingly referred to as “cosmopolitans.” In this binary opposition, diasporic

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populations might be essentialized to those who are excluded from the mainstream culture but inherently attracted to their ancestral and ethnic cultures.

<sup>7</sup> Psy's success in Western markets has been explained in part by his easily consumable image as the funny, racialized, and demasculinized other in the eyes of Western audiences (Glynn & Kim, 2013). Some mainstream American media racialized Psy's "Gangnam Style" rather than engaging with the cultural context of the music (e.g., a parody of the nouveau riche of the Gangnam district in Seoul). Fox News presenter Bill O'Reilly depicted Psy as "a little fat guy from Yong Yang, or some place, and he's jumping up and down," after stating that "the most popular music apparently is that without intelligible words," which obviously referred to the apparent unintelligibility of "Gangnam Style" that was written in Korean (Davis, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Both fans and journalists sometimes call the virtual world of K-pop idols a "universe." One idol group constitutes a universe, while it can cross another idol group's universe and be incorporated into another universe. The term "universe" may correspond to the term "storyworld" used in narrative studies. Storyworlds "encompass not only the story per se, but also the backstory, and sometimes the afterstory (such as the later life of the protagonists, as represented in epilogues), and not only the scene of the story, but all the places that characters think or talk about." (Ryan, 2016, p. 14). By this definition, K-pop idols' universe can be defined as a form of storyworld in which not only music texts but also background stories and after stories about idols are generated and circulated through fans' enunciative participation in social media. The Internet and social media appear to be integral components of the K-pop universe. Several platforms allow K-pops to do chatting with other fans, while some K-pop idols frequently upload their everyday video segments. Moreover, many fan-based websites, such as Netizenbuzz, provide translations of Korean-based K-pop fans' online comments about K-pop stories, gossip, and news. The abundant information appears to provide the overseas fans with important resources for developing the K-pop universe.

<sup>9</sup> It is estimated that K-pop fans' pilgrimage has also contributed to the boost of tourism. Indeed, many K-pop fans interviewed for this chapter have been to Korea for sightseeing, motivated by their interest in K-pop. According to them, the SM Entertainment, the leading K-pop management company's theme park (SM Town Coexatrium) in the Gangnam district, Seoul, was a popular tourist attraction, where they can purchase SM-affiliated K-pop idols' merchandise. In the study, two fans recalled that while they were staying in Korea, they made train trip to a small café in Gwangju (located approximately 260 km away from Seoul), owned by the mother of Suzy, a popular K-pop idol to "feel" the atmosphere and meet with the mother.

<sup>10</sup> In December 2018, V Live had over 973 channels, many of which stream segments of the everyday lives of young Korean pop stars. The live streaming service also includes the stars' live chat sessions with their fans. While watching the stars' live streaming, which is archived and re-playable, viewers can volunteer to provide fansubbing and chat with other viewers. V Live's content includes a wide range of celebrity shows, such as the webcam-style monologues of stars, reality shows, and visual radio shows. While most materials are streamed in Korean, this service has targeted and attracted global audiences. As of November 2018, most visitors (approximately 76%) of this service have been from outside Korea (see [vlive.tv](http://vlive.tv) Traffic Statistics on November 17, 2018, retrieved from [www.alex.com/siteinfo/vlive.tv](http://www.alex.com/siteinfo/vlive.tv)). To reach global audiences, V Live relies heavily on fansubbing, rather than providing official translations. Due to the fan viewers' "free labor," some video clips have over ten versions of subtitles. Fansubbers are rewarded in nonmonetary ways (e.g., given opportunities to call their favorite stars).

<sup>11</sup> In 2007, Viki was established by three American students as a class project to provide video streaming and language services for primarily Asian (Korean in particular) TV content. The streaming site was purchased by the Japanese electronics company Rakuten in 2013 and was relaunched as a for-profit service targeting a global audience. Today, the site provides video content in numerous languages and is syndicated to major streaming service companies, such as Netflix.

<sup>12</sup> The reaction video is a relatively new cultural form that was reportedly started online in the mid-2000s. A famous early example is the circulation of numerous short videos capturing people's reactions to the one-minute trailer for the 2007 Brazilian pornographic film *Hungry Bitches*. The trailer video clip, nicknamed *2 Girls 1 Cup*, was widely reacted to by numerous people on video and contributed to popularizing the term "reaction videos" (Skelton, 2018). The reaction video has emerged as a popular YouTube genre, and some YouTubers who regularly release reaction videos have been recognized as "micro celebrities" who have their own fan bases (Marwick, 2015). Some celebrity

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Youtubers have even become professional media producers and/or entrepreneurs. For example, FBE (originally known as Fine Brothers Entertainment)—the two-man video team best known for its REACT channel on YouTube and its attempt to trademark the term *react*—has established itself as a for-profit media company.

<sup>13</sup> Among numerous K-pop reaction channels on YouTube, ReacttotheK is one of the most widely known. This channel, established in 2016 by a classical music student at the Eastman School of Music in New York, has attracted a large number of subscribers (approximately 550,000 as of June 1, 2019) and has gained exceptional popularity among K-pop fans. Thus, the channel’s regular reactors were even invited to KCON (the annual K-pop convention) in Los Angeles in 2018 as special guests. This channel regularly releases reaction videos, its “Classical Musicians React” series, focusing on classical music students’ takes on K-pop. By reviewing music components of K-pop videos from classical music students’ perspectives, ReacttotheK’s videos are distinguished from typical reaction videos, which primarily present reactors’ (exaggerated) emotional responses to K-pop videos. While this channel was started “for fun” by the main creator, Umu, who was about to graduate from high school in 2016, the creator and reactors have attracted their own fans and have, thus, become keenly aware of their audiences’ responses. That is, reaction video makers are not only audience members but also performers who have their own audiences. It is uncertain whether the channel will become for-profit, like some other YouTuber reactors’ have done. The channel has recently begun fundraising by introducing patron memberships (<https://www.patreon.com/reacttothek>) so that it can improve video quality by using better equipment and paying for the labor.

<sup>14</sup> While this incident was examined by some critics as an intriguing example of new social movement that may move beyond the exclusive nature of earlier Korean student movements (e.g., Lee, 2017), others are relatively skeptical about this appropriation of K-pop (e.g., G. Kim, 2019). For example, G. Kim (2019, p. 24) claims that, although this example of appropriation of K-pop for a protest shows how young people “utilize the neoliberal cultural device for their critical cause”, the protest is no other than “a consumer movement” that requests the university to maintain its degrees’ value and to better serve its students as consumers.