

## Diasporic Youth Culture of K-pop

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### Abstract

This study examines how diasporic Korean youth engage with the recent global circulation of South Korean pop music (“K-pop”). It explores how young diasporic Koreans negotiate K-pop as an ethnic and/or global cultural form in their transition to adulthood. Drawing on interviews with young people of Korean heritage in Canada, the study addresses how a diasporic sound, which connects the nostalgia for the ancestral homeland and the global mediascape, is appropriated for young people’s identity work. By examining diasporic Korean fans’ consumption of K-pop, this study suggests a perspective for understanding the recent K-pop phenomenon as a diasporic youth cultural practice.

For diasporic youth, who are children of immigrants, a pop cultural connection with their ancestral homelands may constitute an important aspect of exploring who they are. Among other pop cultural texts, diasporic pop music, which has been referred to as a “diasporic sound” (Leante 2004) or “second-generation sound” (Huq 2006), is integrated into diasporic youth’s transition to adulthood in between their ancestral homeland and host country. In this regard, this study examines how young people of South Korean (Korean, hereafter) heritage consume diasporic pop music with particular reference to the recent global circulation of Korean pop music (“K-pop”). K-pop as a particular form of pop music produced in Korea is characterized by several features, such as young, same-sex group performers (“idols”); signature dance moves; and visually attractive music videos (Lie and Oh 2014). This musical form has recently been recognized outside of Korea as a key trend of the “Korean Wave” (i.e., the global circulation of Korean pop culture), first in Asia (since the late 1990s) and then across the globe (since the mid-2000s). While the Korean Wave was first triggered by Korean TV dramas in East Asia in the late 1990s, K-pop has emerged as a genre that has led the “New Korean Wave,” which refers to the global penetration of Korean pop culture, especially through social-media platforms and virtually connected fan bases (Jin 2016). Indeed, as evidenced by Psy’s global hit, “Gangnam Style,” in 2012 and, more recently, K-pop boy band BTS’s YouTube record-breaking hit in 2018<sup>1</sup>, K-pop has benefited from its effective integration with social media platforms, such as YouTube. An increasing number of K-pop music video clips, which are available online, have allowed global fans to easily access and remix K-pop content. However, the social media-driven global circulation of K-pop does not necessarily mean that this cultural form easily erases its place of origin when it comes to attracting global audiences. Despite its global fan bases and textual hybridity, K-pop inevitably involves values that are associated with Korea as a nation or nation-state (Fuhr 2015: 9).

In this regard, it is timely to ask how the national attributes implied in K-pop are exercised and signified amongst Koreans who are in diasporic contexts. By analyzing in-depth interviews with youth of Korean heritage in Canada, this study explores how young diasporic Koreans negotiate K-pop as an ethnic and/or global cultural form in their transition to adulthood. In particular, the study addresses how K-pop as a diasporic sound, which connects the nostalgia for the ancestral homeland, the host society, and the global mediascape, is appropriated for young diasporic Koreans' identity work. This study does not simply predict that diasporic Korean youth would naturally be attracted to K-pop due to its ethnic or cultural proximity; rather, probable modes of conjunction between the young people's ancestral homeland and their current place of residence will be critically examined. Despite a growing number of analyses of K-pop's global circulation, there has been little research on the question "What is the *K* in K-pop?" (Lie 2012) and what this means for Koreans overseas. In particular, while diasporic Korean youth have often been assumed to be the core fan base of global K-pop (Park 2013), in-depth studies of this group remain scarce. By examining diasporic Korean fans' consumption of K-pop, this study suggests a perspective for understanding the recent K-pop phenomenon as a diasporic youth cultural practice.

### **Understanding diasporic youth culture**

The diasporic circulation of popular cultures among second-generation youth, such as bhangra music (Huq 2006; Maira 2002; Sharma 1996) and, more recently, K-pop (Park 2013), may be suggestive of the way in which national content is integrated into global context and then contributes to redefining the ethnic identities of diasporic youth. Yet, little empirical research has examined the diasporic flows of popular culture among the children of immigrants. Only a limited number of studies have provided empirical data on and insights into how popular culture is articulated with diasporic youth identities. These studies have examined diasporic youth groups, such as South Asian and East Asian youth in the U.S. (Ju and Lee 2015; Maira 2002; D. C. Oh 2015; Park 2013), Latino youth in the U.S. (Mayer 2003), and East Asian and South Asian youth in the U.K. (Gillespie 1995; Huq 2006; H. Kim 2012). These studies address how young people maintain their ties with their ancestral homelands and ethnic roots via pop cultural products, such as pop music, TV dramas, and films. They also explore how diasporic young people negotiate different modes of cultural identification by appropriating diasporic pop cultural forms.

Early studies explicitly illustrated diasporic pop cultures' role in building positive ethnic identities among ethnic minority youth. For example, Gillespie's (1995) study of diasporic youth of Indian descent in Britain explored how the young people engaged with the films produced in their ancestral homeland in their process of negotiating Britain's dominant media environment. In the study, Gillespie analyzed young minority audiences' diasporic media practices as a process of affirming their cultural identities. More recently, Mayer's (2003) study of Latino American youth illustrated that young Latino women watched telenovelas (a Latino TV drama genre) as a way of symbolically coping with their daily issues as young people of color living in the U.S. In Mayer's (2003) study, young Latina girls reflexively engaged with diasporic TV and, thus, rethought their cultural positions as racialized youth in the U.S.

In comparison to these studies that examine diasporic pop culture as a cultural resource for coping with marginalization in the host society, there has been research focusing on diasporic pop cultural texts' ambivalent meanings and blurring the rigid boundaries of ethnicity. Maira's (2002) study of South Asian "desi" music in New York City illustrates how second-generation

Indian youth negotiate the cultural hybridity of diasporic pop culture. In the study, Maira reveals how diasporic youth's current citizenship and ethnic belonging often contradict each other. According to Maira (2002), the ambivalence and tensions between citizenship and ethnicity can also contribute to diasporic youth's negotiation of the rigid ethnic boundaries. In her study of young Turkish migrants in the Netherlands, Milikowski (2000) characterizes diasporic pop culture consumption among second-generation youth as a process of "de-ethnicization." According to Milikowski (2000), diasporic pop culture from the homeland can contribute to demythifying the essentialized and nostalgic notion of ethnicity. In this manner, a stream of studies on diasporic youth culture and media practices (Maira 2002; Milikowski 2000) has explored the flexible and ambivalent nature of diasporic pop cultural practices among second-generation youth.

Among various diasporic youth groups, Korean youth in North America have been addressed in a few recent case studies. In particular, D. C. Oh's (2015) monograph on Korean American teenagers' consumption of Korean films addresses diasporic youth's identity formation and sociality via popular culture. In this study, diasporic pop culture was appropriated by second-generation Korean youth as a means of acquiring a sense of community and distinguishing themselves from others (e.g., White youth and other Korean youth, such as first-generation Korean immigrants). Thus, diasporic pop culture was considered a resource for empowering the Korean American youth, as it helps them consider themselves as "normal" and, thus, allows them to freely choose different lifestyles. In a similar vein, Park's study reveals how young Korean Americans' viewing of Korean TV dramas allows them to acquire a form of "cultural citizenship," which means "the right to be different" (Park 2013: 126).

Overall, these empirical studies of diasporic youth and popular culture suggest that at a particular period of their transition to adulthood, diasporic youth tend to rediscover and re-signify their ethnic and cultural roots and negotiate different identity positions through consuming pop cultural texts. These findings from various diasporic youth illustrate how the children of immigrants relentlessly oscillate between different modes of belonging throughout their transition to adulthood and are, thus, involved in the formation of "new ethnicities" (Hall 1996). The aforementioned studies have provided empirical data and theoretical lenses for understanding diasporic youth and their engagement with diasporic pop cultural forms. However, they are outdated due to the rapid development of digital media, which has increasingly changed young people's consumption patterns with regard to pop culture. In particular, the studies above, most of which were conducted during the pre-social media era, have not sufficiently explored how diasporic pop culture transcends national boundaries through various media platforms.

These days, transnational media consumption prevails among diasporic youth who desire the pop cultural negotiation of their ethnic identities beyond their current countries of residence and their dominant mediascapes. In particular, digital media's affordance allowing the user to easily generate and engage in the process of media circulation and production may be a significant aspect of understanding diasporic youth's identity work. Notably, the global circulation of K-pop has often been characterized by the fans' online participation, such as fans' online comments, reaction videos, cover dance videos, and other social media-driven experiences (Jung 2017). As K-pop is not simply a musical genre but rather a form of mediated and performative visual culture that allows global fan audiences to continuously reinterpret and remix the original texts, further empirical analysis of K-pop can offer insights into diasporic youth cultural practices in the transnational social media era.

### **Studying diasporic Korean youth**

Among Korean diasporas across the globe, Koreans in Canada represent a relatively recent and young cohort. The number of Koreans in Canada (including international students and long-stay tourists) reached 200,000 in the mid-2000s (approximately 220,000 as of 2015), which is far fewer than the number of Koreans in the U.S. (2,239,000 as of 2015) (Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017). Among Koreans in Canada, the present study focuses on those who are born in the host country (second generation) and those who immigrate to the host country during their early childhood (1.5 generation).

The interview data analyzed in the present study were drawn from a part of a larger project that examined K-pop fan audiences in Canada (May 2015–August 2017). As this article aims to analyze diasporic Koreans' consumption of K-pop as a diasporic cultural form, it analyzed the data set comprising interviews with 19 diasporic Korean youth while excluding those of other cultural groups. The participants whose individual semi-structured interviews were analyzed in this article were young K-pop fans aged under 30 who were born in or immigrated to Canada during their early childhood. The participants, who are introduced by their pseudonyms in the article, were recruited primarily through snowballing methods in the provinces of British Columbia and Ontario. The participants—eight males and 11 females—were primarily university students in their early twenties, with the exception of four participants (each with a university degree) who were in the workforce and one participant who was a 17-year-old high school student. Among the participants, two were born in Canada to Korean parents, while 17 immigrated to Canada along with their Korean parents before the age of 13. With one person who immigrated at the age of 13, most participants moved to Canada during their early childhood—the sample's average age of immigration was 6.5.

Each participant was invited to a semi-structured interview session lasting approximately one hour, during which he or she was encouraged to talk about how he or she became a K-pop fan and how he or she consumes and interprets K-pop in his or her everyday contexts. As the study aimed to address young Korean Canadians who are enthusiastic about K-pop, those Korean Canadians who sometimes listen to K-pop but do not self-identify as “fans” were excluded. By focusing on young “fans” of diasporic pop music, the study explored how diasporic youth become consciously aware of their pop cultural tastes in relation to their ancestral homeland. At the beginning of each interview, the participant was asked to describe his or her fan identity (by responding to questions such as “How dedicated do you think you are to K-pop?”). Interestingly, a few participants distanced themselves from highly committed fans who excessively “follow” K-pop idols all the time online. One participant described himself as follows: “If I go to a concert or something, I don't scream, but I do enjoy the music” (Noah, 19-year-old university student). Hilda, 19-year-old university student, also described herself as a fan “just following the groups from a distance.” This self-identification might be due to the nature of the interviewees' demographic (i.e., a relatively educated and older cohort than early and mid-teenage fans, who are considered the most dedicated demographic of K-pop fandom). Indeed, several participants distinguished themselves from extremely dedicated teenage fans, who are sometimes negatively represented in the media and even among fans.<sup>2</sup> Given the interviewees' self-descriptions, they can be described as fan audiences who are relatively “skilled audiences” (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998), rather than as “hard-core fans” who are exclusively committed to one particular subcultural style.

The participants were also asked to briefly describe who they were in terms of national, cultural, and/or ethnic identities. Most Korean Canadian participants described themselves as

being in the middle of Korean and Canadian (or White) cultures. For example, Jonathan, who immigrated at the age of eight, stated, “I would place myself as not super Korean but not super White.” As examined in previous studies of second-generation Koreans in the U.S. (e.g., D. Y. Kim 2014; D. C. Oh 2015), ethnic minority youth tend to struggle with an uncertain sense of belonging. As second-generation youth are located between two (or more) cultures—the cultures of the homeland and the host society—identity-seeking processes during their transition to adulthood were further complicated. The period of youth is particularly significant for young people of ethnic minorities and children of immigrants, who have to negotiate different senses of belonging and being “in the liminal spaces between childhood and adulthood, or between one geopolitical state and another,” and they thus encounter the imperative question “Who am I?” (Durham 2004: 141).

### **K-pop as an ethnic sound**

The rapid diffusion of digital media technologies has a significant impact on the process of migration and settlement. In particular, due to increasing transnational connections, diasporic life engages with a mediated co-presence with ancestral homelands (Madianou 2016). In the present study, some interviewees were already exposed to Korean pop culture at a relatively early age due to family or peer viewing of Korean TV. Ethan, a 28-year-old Canada-born schoolteacher in Toronto, recalled his childhood experiences in Toronto. Describing how Korean TV programs had been watched in his household, he stated, “Every Friday, my family would sit down. My mom and dad would rent movies or dramas on little VHS (tapes) and would watch them with us.” Reportedly, in North American Korean communities, the viewing of recorded Korean TV programs rented from Koreatown stores was a family or peer pastime until the wide dissemination of Internet-mediated streaming TV services (Park 2013). Luke, a 25-year-old man who has lived in Toronto for the past 16 years, commented on the changed methods of accessing Korean pop culture in Toronto.

People are more exposed to Korean cultures, Korean food, and of course K-pop. But, is that because Korean culture is suddenly more competitive and superior to other cultures and media? I don't think so. I think it's more of, because of the Internet . . . Ten to 15 years ago, to watch a Korean drama, we had to go to places like Galleria or H-mart [i.e., Korean supermarkets in Korean-populated areas in Toronto] and rent a video tape . . . But now, [if] you want to watch a Korean drama, or something like Music Bank [i.e., a K-pop TV show], things like that, [you know] where you can access K-pop stuff . . . You just type “Korean” on YouTube, and you get Psy, AOA, APink, Girls Generation, Wonder Girls [i.e., K-pop stars], right?

Koreatowns in North American cities used to be venues where “homeland media” content, such as Korean TV programs and films, were popularly circulated for Korean immigrants and their children prior to extensive Internet penetration (Park 2013). However, the arrival of high-speed Internet and mobile digital media has changed media use patterns in Korean diasporas, especially among young immigrants and diasporic youth. Korean TV stations have launched extensive direct global content services, while Korean TV programs have also been available on numerous (illegal) streaming services or fan-based sites. Furthermore, the high availability of K-pop music videos on YouTube and song lyrics often translated voluntarily by the fans has been considered a factor contributing to the recent global circulation of K-pop (Jin 2016; Jung 2017). These

changing media environments among diasporic Korean audiences have rendered physical rental stores in Koreatowns obsolete.

The diasporic youth's early exposure to Korean TV through the family did not directly lead them to K-pop fandom. For example, Ethan, whose parents watched Korean TV programs regularly, was not enthusiastic about K-pop until his early twenties—that is, only after he left his parental home and visited Korea. He keenly discovered his ethnic roots while he was in Korea: “When I was 23, I went to Korea, and I kind of got in touch . . . back in touch with my ethnicity and my culture. And [Korean] music is a big part of it, right? And so, I just started to get more interested, and I liked it.” Ethan's account resonates with “ritualized travel back to the homeland,” which is often observed among immigrants (Maira 2002, 146). For first-generation immigrants, whose family members are often left behind in the homeland, return travels to the country of origin may be relatively habitual behaviors. However, for the diasporic youth, whose memories of the ancestral homeland remain imagined rather than embodied, visits to the ancestral homeland are often associated with an intentional exploration of ethnic identity. In some cases, K-pop was a motivation (although it may not be the only motivational factor) for young Korean Canadians to visit Korea. For example, Noah, a 19-year-old university student in Toronto, wanted to experience what he saw in K-pop videos: “I recently wanted to go back (to Korea) to visit. Just be like enveloped in the culture. I've seen some videos of Korean clubs, so I wanna experience that, too.” For most interviewees, it was not until their secondary school years that they became enthusiastic about Korean pop culture and K-pop. That is, the participants were initiated as K-pop fans in the late 2000s or early 2010s, during which K-pop began to increasingly attract global attention.

There were motivational factors that initiated these young people as K-pop fans in their mid or late teens after a long period of (direct or indirect) exposure to Korean pop culture. Among others, diasporic young Koreans' exploration of their ethnic identities in their late adolescence was a crucial factor. As revealed in previous studies of diasporic youth, “‘coming out' as ethnic in college” (Maira 2002, 189) is not exceptional to the Korean Canadians in the study (Danico 2004; D. Y. Kim 2014). Several young people in the study recalled that during their childhood, they were uneasy about their ethnic backgrounds and differences. For Sasha, a 21-year-old university student who grew up in a middle-class, white-dominant neighborhood in the suburbs of Toronto after her family's immigration to Canada when she was six, her ethnic identity was something she had to hide. She stated, “When I was in high school, which was three or four years ago, then . . . even then, it was like, I felt kind of ashamed to be Asian. You know, I didn't want to speak Korean in public.” In her “very white, pretty” high school, it felt “kind of weird to speak Korean.” Throughout her school years, Sasha learned not to talk about her ethnic identity, yet she seemed to conform to the dominant racial order. However, she gradually explored her ethnic roots when she attended a university in downtown Toronto, where she was exposed to many Korean and Asian youth. During this period, K-pop functioned as a means by which she could positively identify with her Korean heritage. She described her surprise when the Gangnam Style phenomenon arrived in Toronto in 2012: “[At my university festival,] I saw every single person in that parade dancing to Psy's ‘Gangnam Style.’ It hit me like, ‘This is insane! We're singing, we're dancing to a Korean song right now!’” In this manner, K-pop increasingly facilitated young Korean Canadians' exploration of their cultural identity in their late teens or early twenties—most commonly during their university years.

Sasha's experience of “coming out as ethnic in college” and the positive reaffirmation of her ethnicity were not exceptional, as several interviewees recollected similar experiences. Being

located between two (or more) cultures—the cultures of the homeland and the host society—the diasporic Korean youth had to cope with the transition to adulthood in complicated ways and, in the process, reaffirmed their ethnicity. For example, Camilla, a 23-year-old university student who grew up in white-dominant neighborhoods since her immigration at the age of eight until she attended a university in Toronto, recalled the struggles she had to cope with in her teens.

I think in high school, I was really frustrated because I felt I was stuck in the middle. I hated, kind of, the Korean culture because I wanted to become more like . . . I wanted my parents to become more Westernized instead of being super Korean and super strict. I was kind of in the middle. I didn't know where to [identify myself]. . . because I wasn't super Korean, but I wasn't super Canadian either.

Camilla tried to stay away from Koreans and Korean cultural materials, such as K-pop, during her teens.

I wasn't that big a fan of K-pop when I had a stronger Canadian background. I tried to stay away from Koreans, actually. I kind of boycotted K-pop . . . because no one else was listening to K-pop [when and where I grew up] . . . I wanted to fit in, so I had no choice but to avoid the whole K-pop [phenomenon] and listen to what my other friends were listening to, which was like just Western pop instead of K-pop. But then it changed when I moved to Toronto . . . Ever since I moved to Toronto, I think I've become more Korean than Canadian. I think it's because I'm like surrounded by a lot of Korean culture . . . Korean people. And so it kind of changed how I think or how I identify myself.

In this manner, the multicultural atmosphere of urban space (university in particular) and her interaction with more Korean and Asian peers led Camilla toward the reaffirmation of her ethnic identity and her initiation as a K-pop fan. This process of reaffirming one's ethnicity in one's twenties was evident in several other interviewees' accounts. It resonates with the identity strategies that Korean American youth adopt during their transition to adulthood (D. Y. Kim, 2014). According to D. Y. Kim (2014), to “lessen the taunting and teasing from peers, neighbors, or strangers,” diasporic Koreans develop two different strategies in their transition to adulthood. They “downplay or hide” their Korean ethnic identity, or they otherwise “seek refuge and protection in their ethnicity” (D. Y. Kim 2014: 152). In the present study, these two strategies were adopted in different phases of the young people's transition to adulthood. While downplaying their Korean ethnic identity is more common during childhood, ethnic identification is often observed later in their lives (i.e., in their twenties)

K-pop appeared to be more than a form of music for some diasporic Koreans. As Sasha, the aforementioned 21-year-old student, noted, K-pop is “more of a cultural thing rather than a musical thing.” She became interested in, and enthusiastic about, K-pop because “it's a part of my cultural identity. Because I can understand it.” Indeed, the interviewees' identification with K-pop and Korean roots appeared to be influenced by their cultural proximity to, and literacy about, Korean language and culture. Some interviewees linked the attraction of K-pop with its cultural difference, which cannot be translated into English, as Nina, a 20-year-old student, stated: “I feel that, obviously, there are Korean words that can't be easily translated into English. So, I think that's also important and cool as well.” In this manner, K-pop can be a cultural means to explore and reaffirm the ethnic identity of diasporic Koreans. The interviewees considered the consumption of Korean TV and K-pop to be an effective method of improving their literacy about Korea. As Adam, a 20-year-old university student in Toronto, stated, “[K-pop is] a good,

common ground to have to interact with Korean people, and that's the way I kept improving my Korean verbal abilities.”

K-pop also functioned as a platform enabling diasporic Koreans to become integrated into their ethnic communities. By participating in the diasporic culture of K-pop, the youth of Korean heritage had opportunities to get along with other Koreans in Canada: Korean international students and recent Korean immigrants (also known as “Fresh off the boat” [FOB]). For example, the aforementioned Adam, who recently began interacting with first-generation Korean immigrants at his Korean Canadian church, K-pop was considered an effective tool for understanding other Korean immigrants of different backgrounds:

K-pop is a good icebreaker here and there. And it just improved the friendship . . . Right now, I'm interacting a lot with those we call “fresh off the boat,” and [without K-pop] it would be quite difficult for me to interact with them and to understand what they're saying.

K-pop was an integral component of the diasporic Koreans' management and exploration of ethnic sociality. “If K-pop was completely withdrawn from my life, I think those who I would be hanging out with would also change,” said Sasha. K-pop allows diasporic Korean youth of different backgrounds to develop their friendships, as it offers “a growing chance of intermingling with one another through ethnic public space and of sharing cultural references” (Park 2013: 128). Indeed, Ethan, who was born in Canada, stated, “When I meet 1.5 [i.e., Koreans who immigrated to Canada in their late childhood] or *yuhaksaeng* [i.e., Korean international students in Canada], K-pop's always a nice topic of intro . . .”

Overall, the young people's initiation as K-pop fans correlated with their reaffirmation of Korean ethnic identity in their late teens or early twenties. This process implies that young people's consumption of pop music is a cultural practice into which their identity positions are deeply incorporated. For diasporic Korean youth, consuming K-pop seemed to be a process of making sense of, and negotiating, who they are. Their initiation as K-pop fans influenced, and was influenced by, the reaffirmation of their ethnicity. Of course, K-pop's ethnic meanings are not a single factor that determines how and why K-pop is consumed as a diasporic sound. As discussed in the following section, K-pop is signified simultaneously as ethnic and global pop culture, and these two different aspects are interwoven within K-pop fandom among diasporic Koreans.

### **K-pop as a global sound**

In the diasporic context, K-pop is appropriated as a cultural resource for young people to negotiate their ethnic identities and strategies. However, the diasporic consumption of K-pop does not necessarily mean the pursuit of an authentic ethnic identity or the feeling of inherited nostalgia for the ancestral homeland. Young Korean Canadians in the present study not only explored cultural and ethnic links to K-pop but also enjoyed its global aspects. In particular, for diasporic youth, K-pop might be “de-ethnicized” to some extent (Milikowski 2000) while being re-signified as a youthful and trendy cultural form. Some young people in the study described K-pop and its idols as “cool” pop cultural icons, compared with their Western counterparts. By consuming the coolness of K-pop, young Korean Canadians attenuate the national and ethnic “color” of K-pop, and, thus, this cultural form is reappropriated not only as a diasporic export from the ancestral homeland but also as a signifier connotes youthful, new and advanced cultural form for global youth. In the young fans' accounts, K-pop is a stylistic youth cultural form that



can be enjoyed by any “cool” young people regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. Olivia, a 19-year-old fan, stated, “K-pop music videos have the quality of capturing attention with a lot of color and clarity and very flashy dances . . . kind of a bit of sex appeal, too . . .” K-pop’s production system is known for its extensive collaboration of global (primarily Western) producers, composers, and choreographers (Fuhr 2015). Due to its musical style highly influenced by that of Western pop music, hybridity that hides the place of origin has been identified as one of the key characteristics of K-pop (Fuhr 2015; Jin 2016; Jung, 2011).

Indeed, some young people in the study tried to enjoy the “cool” sound and performance of K-pop without necessarily associating K-pop with its place of origin. As Hilda, a 19-year-old student, described below, K-pop was considered “younger” and “happier” music with a new “look”, compared to Western pop music:

There's a lot of energy in K-pop, the music videos are really bright and colorful. So I think a lot of people are interested in K-pop because it's just happier than American music sometimes, and it's easier to dance to as well. And, I guess younger fans are more attracted to K-pop as well, because it's focused on looks. So they think, “Wow, these are nice looking people”.

According to the interviewees, K-pop was a unique combination of various elements, especially its “fancy” content (e.g., its catchy sound and “soft” atmosphere) and the playful ways in which the content is delivered and consumed (i.e., social media-driven remix culture). Above all, the content side of K-pop was often identified by most interviewees as its appealing factor. Adam, a 20-year-old student, stated, “It [K-pop] is fancy and is a sort of fantasized type of music. And it’s designed to be catchy. In terms of catchy beats . . . it sticks around in my head for a while.” He was familiar with Korean hip-hop music and its American counterpart, and he specifically compared the two as follows: “K-pop is mostly softer than what I listen to here [American hip-hop music].” Camilla, a 23-year-old student, described K-pop as “brighter” than Western pop music:

Most K-pop is more on the bright side . . . like it’s cuter. It’s more based on performance and dance. And Western (music) is more about . . . kind of dark? It’s more about like drugs, sex, and whatever. But Korean pop is more about “Oh, love me” or something like that.

In this manner, “softness” seemed to constitute the K-pop style. For the interviewees, K-pop songs, dances, and narratives were often “soft” and “cutesy”, while K-pop idols were “good looking boys and pretty girls”. These comments resonate with recent studies’ analysis of K-pop as a cultural genre represented by the male idols’ “soft masculinities” (Jung 2011) and female idols’ “mandatory cuteness” (C. Oh 2014).<sup>3</sup>

In addition to its catchy sound and softness, the social media-driven participatory fan culture seems to constitute the “cool” style of K-pop. The increasing availability of K-pop videos through YouTube and other video-streaming sites has been considered a major factor contributing to the rise of global K-pop fans’ participatory culture (Jung 2017). Young Korean Canadians in the study engaged with K-pop as an ongoing practice rather than a fixed mode of “authentic” Korean pop music. Sasha, a 21-year-old university student who was a member of a K-pop cover dance club and who performed at K-pop events in Toronto, stated the nature of K-pop as “doing” through engaging in social media.

A lot of Korean girls have an interest in the [K-pop] dances. Because it's not too difficult, right? So all of my friends do that on a regular basis. They would watch music videos and then just know the dance very easily. I don't even think a lot of them have dance backgrounds. It's just easy to follow and . . . there're so many YouTube tutorials online teaching how to do Korean girl group dances. It's very easy for anybody to kind of follow along.

In this manner, for Sasha, K-pop was not simply music to listen to but also a platform where young people could easily play online and offline.

K-pop's cool content, along with the playful consumption process of the content via social media, contributes to enhancing its "subcultural capital", which refers to knowledge about, and ability to perform, a particular subculture's language, skills, and styles (Thornton 1996). In the subcultural symbolic economy of K-pop, the fans considered themselves as "cool" consumers and, thus, distinguish themselves from the imagined mass of mainstream consumers (Jensen 2006: 263)—in particular, their peers who consume mainstream Western pop music and their Korean immigrant parents, who habitually consume older/classic Korean pop culture content.

On the one hand, the Korean Canadians distinguished their peer K-pop fans from others. For example, Victoria, a 17-year-old high school student, noted that she enjoyed dancing to K-pop with her friends, who were primarily young people of Asian ethnic backgrounds. She stated, "Whenever we have spare time [i.e., free periods at school], we always listen to it [K-pop], dance on the spot, and actually sing along. We actually laugh a lot when we're talking about K-pop, but not much about American pop." Although some interviewees who grew up in white-dominant neighborhoods used to be hesitant to come out as K-pop fans, most interview participants associated their K-pop fan knowledge and skills with positive symbolic values—subcultural capital of K-pop—at the time of interviews.

On the other hand, the young Korean Canadians distinguished their cultural consumption from their parents'. For the diasporic youth, K-pop was sharply contrasted with the relatively "traditional" Korean pop cultural content that their parents would enjoy, such as Korean serial TV dramas. Olivia, a 19-year-old student, could not understand her mother's heavy viewing of Korean serial dramas:

My mom is a really huge . . . K-drama fan. When she gets into it, she just watches it until it ends. She's a 'marathoning' type of person. While she's watching it, she's like crying, and then the next morning, she's like, "I lost so much sleep. Why would I do that to myself? I'm so dumb."

However, despite the interviewees' attempt to distinguish K-pop from other Korean pop culture content, in reality, the Korean pop culture that diasporic youth consume is not always be sharply contrasted with the content that their parents enjoy. In fact, for several interviewees, family viewing of Korean TV was still a pastime, and, thus, family members tended to talk about Korean TV (e.g., what new TV programs are interesting and what website offers free streaming services). For example, Olivia, the aforementioned K-pop fan who disregarded the Korean TV dramas that her mother liked, admitted that her mother's TV viewing was not be easily detachable from her own interest in K-pop: "I've always had this background (music) in my house because my mom watches Korean dramas, so naturally, I hear songs off the OSTs [original soundtracks], and after you search the OSTs, you find the entire world of Korean music and then

just kind of follow it.” These intergenerational interactions resonate with Yoon and Jin’s (2016) findings that communal or family viewing of Korean TV programs is a common practice that is observed among diasporic Asian audiences of Korean media.

The global aspect of K-pop signified by young Korean Canadians in the present study implies that K-pop is a negotiation of ethnic meanings through social media-driven participatory culture. As Maira (2002) has pointed out, diasporic pop culture is not a form of culture that embodies the “pure” feel of the homeland, but it is often exercised by remixing elements such as nostalgia and modernity. For example, as shown in bhangra culture among Asian British youth, diasporic pop culture can be considered as “the concomitant affirmation and de-centring of Asian identity” (Sharma 1996: 54). For diasporic Korean youth, the pleasure of consuming K-pop should not be reduced to their pursuit of ethnic authenticity (Maira 2002) or long-distance nationalism (Anderson 1983). However, it should also be noted that the “coolness” of K-pop is not be entirely free from its ethnic meanings, and, thus, some diasporic Koreans have limited interests in, and/or understanding of, K-pop. According to the interviewees, despite the diasporic fans’ appreciation of K-pop’s “cool” style, K-pop was disregarded by many non-Koreans and highly “Westernized” Korean Canadians—those who were often called “bananas” by the interviewees.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, the features that make K-pop “cool” for the diasporic fans in the study might be those that are most disregarded by others (non-fans of Korean and other ethnic backgrounds). For example, a few interviewees pointed out that K-pop’s softness tended to be perceived by others as sissiness. Dale, a 20-year-old fan, commented on his non-Korean friends’ reactions to K-pop: “All of my Canadian and American friends see K-pop as like very girly and sissy.” A few interviewees also pointed out “Westernized” young people of Korean heritage who are ignorant of K-pop. For example, Sasha commented on her boyfriend, whom she described as a “more second-generation” Korean Canadian.

My boyfriend is more second-generation. The reason why he’s not so interested in K-pop is because of that. Because he’s like “Yo, this isn’t real music” or whatever. So, I think people who definitely identify themselves as less Korean—so, [who are] more second-generation or completely Canadian—will not listen to it because they think it’s lame. So, again, I think it’s like your level of identity.

According to the Korean Canadian fans, K-pop’s coolness as a global youth cultural form tend to be appreciated particularly among those who have not been “whitewashed.”

Overall, the young people in the study did not enjoy K-pop simply because it was associated with their ethnic roots. As discussed above, they distinguished K-pop from the older or more traditional Korean media texts that first-generation immigrants habitually consume, and they explored the global aspect of K-pop as a youthful cultural trend. As Huq (2006) suggests, a diasporic sound is a cultural resource “enabling the listeners to escape their time, place and circumstances thus relocating and liberating youthful participants away from their parental moorings” (pp. 83–84). Similarly, for the diasporic Koreans, K-pop was considered a playful and liberating sound that allowed them to explore a new form of identity.

## **Conclusion**

This study has discussed how K-pop is incorporated into diasporic Koreans’ transition to adulthood. The study has examined the way in which K-pop is signified as a diasporic sound through which ethnic identities are renegotiated among young Korean Canadians. For the young people, consuming K-pop was a process of making sense of who they were. In their accounts, K-

pop was identified as an ethnic *and* global sound. While consuming K-pop was a process of reaffirming ethnicity, it was also a process of playfully engaging with the subcultural capital of K-pop as a cool and youthful sound. K-pop was compared with mainstream Western pop music on the one hand and, on the other, with other Korean media texts that were habitually consumed by their parents, who were first-generation immigrants. In so doing, the young people viewed K-pop as a global sound. For the diasporic Koreans, K-pop was considered a playful cultural practice that allowed them to explore a new form of identity.

Given the research findings, it is necessary to understand the practice of consuming K-pop *in* context by looking at how particular fan audiences assuming particular subject positions appropriate K-pop as a cultural resource for their identity work. In the present study, Korean Canadian youth who went through the transitional phases of questioning and reaffirming their ethnic roots made sense of, and made use of, K-pop as an ethnic *and* global sound. As recent studies of diasporic youth culture have suggested, a diasporic sound is not simply about the pursuit of authentic identity and nostalgia but may be more about the present and future that diasporic youth cope with and imagine (Maira 2002).

K-pop is a product that is influenced by globalizing and nationalizing forces. As Fuhr (2015) analyzes, the global circulation of K-pop has been indebted to the role of the Korean nation-state for globally branding its cultural products. K-pop as a global project and product seems to be facilitated by the national desire to globalize the national cultural content and expand the cultural industry. Whereas the content is considered hybrid pop music (Lie and Oh 2014), K-pop has been unavoidably a Korean product that cannot remove the “K” in it (Fuhr 2015; Lie 2012). Partly due to the difficulty removing the K as a national signifier, K-pop still remains in the margin of the Canadian mediascape, which is dominated by “systemic whiteness” or “whitestream” (Fleras, 2016). Thus, among young Korean Canadians, those who identify themselves more with White dominant cultural norms, especially those known as “bananas”, are not particularly interested in K-pop. The existence of different groups of diasporic Korean youth implies that the findings in this research drawn from a small sample focusing on K-pop fans may not be generalizable to the entire population of Korean Canadian youth.

Despite a growing scholarly attention to global circulation of Korean pop culture, empirical studies of K-pop have insufficiently addressed how its national and ethnic attributes are transnationally circulated among diasporic Korean youth. To fill the gap in the literature, the research has explored how diasporic Korean youth in Canada, as a unique fan-base of the global K-pop phenomenon, engage with K-pop and negotiate their identity as Korean Canadians. For a comprehensive understanding of K-pop as a diasporic cultural practice, further investigation is needed to examine how K-pop fan cultures have evolved among young people of Korean heritage in different cultural regions, such as Latin America and Asia. Moreover, given that K-pop has increasingly reached out to young people of various ethnic backgrounds via social media, it would be beneficial to explore how diasporic Korean fans and fans of non-Korean backgrounds interact with each other, and engage with the emerging multiethnic youth culture of K-pop.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> With 35.9 million views, BTS's "Fake Love" music video, released on May 18, 2018, was recorded as the most-viewed video in a 24-hour period to debut on YouTube in 2018 (Kelley 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Some interviewees used the term "*sasaeng* fans" and/or "Koreaboos" to describe extreme K-pop fans. *Sasaeng* fans means the young fans who obsessively follow the private lives of K-pop idols while the term Koreaboos refers to the non-Korean fans who are obsessive about K-pop and other Korean culture.

<sup>3</sup> Popular male stars in recent Korean pop culture have been characterised by their "pretty boy" images (also known as *kkonminam*, which literally means a flower-like beautiful man) (Jung 2011). In comparison, female K-pop idols have often been represented by their cuteness or cutesiness, which prioritizes girlish-femininity to womanly sexiness (Oh 2014)

<sup>4</sup> For the interviewees, "Bananas" meant "Whitewashed" or "Westernized" people of Korean heritage. The colloquial term "bananas" mean those who are "yellow on the outside but white on the inside" and "consciously work toward divesting themselves of what they perceive as Korean culture or Korean ways" while having mostly White friends (H.C. Kim 2008). In the present study, regardless of their age of immigration to Canada, several young diasporic Koreans distinguishes themselves from "bananas".

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