

Postcolonial Production and Consumption of Global K-pop

Kyong Yoon
University of British Columbia Okanagan

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Abstract

The recent global dissemination of K-pop (South Korean pop music) offers an intriguing case for media studies, as it reveals postcolonial traces and negotiation in media flows. To analyze the postcolonial implications of the global K-pop phenomenon, this chapter examines the production and consumption of K-pop. First, it addresses the production of K-pop as a postcolonial process by exploring how the cultural form has gone through particular historical and cultural moments. Second, it examines how K-pop is consumed and re-signified in a transnational context. This empirical study illustrates and analyzes how a cultural item emerging from a postcolonial context can be re-signified and re-appropriated for cultural negotiation by subaltern audiences in the West.

Keywords: K-pop (South Korean pop music), postcoloniality, subaltern audience, Asian Canadians, “idol system”, social media

Introduction

The global dissemination of K-pop (South Korean pop music) and its fandom shows how a cultural form emerging from a postcolonial context can be transnationally re-signified and consumed. Compared to K-pop's earlier introduction to the intra-Asian region, the latest K-pop phenomenon that extends beyond Asia has been referred to as a global or new phenomenon (Jin, 2016; Lee & Nornes, 2015). The global phase of K-pop is particularly intriguing for media studies as it embodies ironies accompanied by globalization. As Ono & Kwon (2013) have pointed out, K-pop's recent global rise "seems almost ironic given Korea's colonized position during much of the twentieth century" (p. 199). In this respect, global K-pop can be considered a postcolonial media phenomenon as its production and dissemination have emerged as a result of South Korea's postcolonial struggle. Thus, global K-pop may not be fully analyzed without addressing its postcolonial dimension, which may be insufficiently captured by Western-oriented media theories.

K-pop's global flows mean more than its global reach or growing power in media markets, as the flows imply the complexity and inequality of media production and reception on a global level. K-pop's textual production might be a result of "mimicry" emerging from both the postcolonial cultural histories of South Korea (Lie, 2012) and the national media industry's strategic hybridization (Jin, 2016). K-pop's reception process may reflect the disparity, rather than uniformity, of global media audiencehood (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015). In this respect, the production and consumption of global K-pop might be considered an example of "a postcolonial interruption" of Western-oriented, universalized media analysis (Shome, 2016, p. 247). In order to explore the "postcolonial interruption" of K-pop in media globalization, this chapter analyzes how K-pop is produced and consumed in a transnational context. First, it addresses the production of K-pop as a postcolonial process by exploring how the cultural form has gone through particular historical and cultural moments. Second, it examines the consumption of K-pop as a postcolonial process by exploring how it is consumed and re-signified in a transnational context. In particular, to effectively illustrate the media experiences of subaltern audiences in the West, the study addresses a minority group—Asian Canadian youth—that holds a relatively marginal audience position.

The recent phenomenon of global K-pop may also offer an intriguing case for furthering postcolonial media studies. Existing media studies have explored the globalization of media, which "has inevitably always carried some postcolonial implications" (Merten & Kramer, 2016, p. 13). However, global media studies has not sufficiently developed a postcolonial perspective that challenges Western-oriented media analyses (Merten & Kramer, 2016; Shome, 2016). Not unlike many other social scientific disciplines, media studies has maintained a highly Western-oriented perspective, which "neglects how media functions in the Global South (including in the 'developed' South)" (Shome, 2016, p.246). Thus, while the application of postcolonial analysis to media studies has been suggested for understanding the historical complexities and power relations of mediated worlds (Cere, 2011; Cere, 2016; Fernández, 1999; Shome, 2016; Shome & Hegde, 2002), the field of postcolonial media studies remains nascent. To move beyond the pitfalls of media studies' default framework, in which a postcolonial perspective is under-explored, an investigation into multiple power relations in media practices is required.

A few recent efforts to facilitate a postcolonial perspective in media studies have explored how such themes as colonizer-colonized relationships, hybridity, orientalism, and subalternity are integrated into global and local media practices (Cere, 2011; Cere, 2016). By doing so, media studies has gradually addressed colonial and non-Western media histories as

well as the geopolitics of media production and consumption (Merten & Kramer, 2016, p.13; See also Shome, 2016). This chapter's empirical analysis can deepen an understanding of the power relations implicated in transnational media flows and provide preliminary insights for further facilitating postcolonial media studies. For this purpose, this chapter addresses how K-pop has been globalized through postcolonial relations, and how it may obtain geopolitical meanings amongst a particular audience group –Asian Canadian youth. By focusing on this demographic who has bi- or multi-cultural subject positions, this article can effectively analyze K-pop fans' postcolonial subjectivity.

In Canada, a nation-state that was developed by immigration after settler colonialism, Asian Canadians have occupied a visible community that constitutes approximately 14% of the nation's population as of 2011. Asian populations' significant number may explain why Canada has recently been considered one of the major Western national markets for K-pop (Yoon & Jin, 2016). Canada is not only a market for K-pop but also a contributor to this emerging phenomenon because of creative efforts by several Canadian-born and/or raised young talents, such as Henry Lau (a member of Super Junior-M since 2008). While the Canadian music market has been ranked 7th in size (Smirke, 2015), it has struggled with a lack of locally produced content and relied largely on the American music industry. As of 2011, international artists represented 76.5% of album sales and 85.6% of digital track sales in the Canadian music market (CIMA, 2016). At this point, there is no accumulative data on K-pop's market share in the Canadian market, except for a few data charts, such as the Billboard Canadian Album chart. In the Billboard Top 100 Canadian Album chart, only three K-pop musicians have appeared (Benjamin, 2016): Psy for three songs (Gangnam Style at No. 1 for seven weeks in 2012, Gentleman at No. 9 in 2013, and Daddy at No. 36 in 2015); Exo for Call Me Baby (No. 98 in 2015); and BTS for Wings (No. 19 in 2016). Thus, it may be assumed that, except for Psy's global hits, K-pop's sales in Canada are rather insignificant. However, despite K-pop's seemingly insignificant market shares, its territory is allegedly increasing amongst young Canadians and in social media-driven environments, which might not be fully represented by official market share reports (Yoon & Jin, 2016). Given this context, this chapter examines the role of "global K-pop" as a form of pop culture product in national and transnational markets and as cultural texts for marginalized groups of young people in Canada.

Producing Global K-pop

"K-pop" may sound like an oxymoron, as the proper noun implies pop music made in Korea on the one hand, and pop music designed for and defined by the outside of Korea on the other hand. As Fuhr (2015) pointed out, K-pop may masquerade as the "global" by implicating particular forms of imagination, which can be marked by "its inherent desire to be(come) global pop and to erase the K in its name" (p. 16). The contradictory attempt to hide and seek the "K" in K-pop appears to co-exist in the global K-pop phenomenon. K-pop's emergence as a key pop musical trend in South Korea has been indebted largely to a postcolonial complexity that comprises the country's cultural struggle with the legacy of colonizing forces - Western and Japanese influences. Western pop music styles performed at music clubs on US Army bases (i.e. the Eighth United States Army) and a radio channel established for US soldiers in South Korea – AFKN (American Forces Korean Network, renamed AFN Korea) – played key roles in training South Korean musicians and audiences (Shin, 2013, pp. 135–159). Numerous Korean pop musicians from the 1950s – 1970s indeed began their music careers at clubs in the US Army bases.

The American influence on Korean pop music did not decrease after the 1970s. Rather, it was rapid Westernization that potentially triggered the expansion of South Korea's pop music industry during the 1990s. The sensational hip-hop band *Seo Taiji and the Boys* (1991–1996) exemplifies how the Western hip-hop musical style was introduced and localized in mainstream pop music markets in South Korea. The band was so influential on the Korean music industry that its singer/songwriter and front person Seo Taiji was sometimes named the “President of Popular Culture” by the media. Interestingly, one of the main reasons for young audiences’ enthusiasm and fandom for Seo Taiji’s music is that it “did not sound Korean” (Lie, 2012, p. 349). The establishment of a K-pop management system by Lee Soo-Man, the founder of SM Entertainment, can be seen as another example of Western influences on the establishment of contemporary K-pop. Lee, who is one of the most important figures in today’s K-pop industry, was reportedly inspired by the American media system during his study abroad in California, USA in the 1980s (Lie, 2012, p. 354).

Along with Western pop music, the Japanese media system has offered Korean music producers and corporations an important reference point. Due to the colonial history and traumas associated with Japan’s occupation and colonization of the Korean peninsula (1910–1945), Japanese pop cultural commodities were banned until 1997 in South Korea. Moreover, even after the ban lift in 1997, numerous restrictions on the sale of Japanese pop culture in South Korean media markets have continued. However, despite the long restrictions of Japanese pop culture, the South Korean media industry has often been affected by its Japanese counterpart J-pop, in terms of show format, musical style, and promotion system. In particular, the Japanese “idol (*aidoru*) system” (since the 1980s) has substantially affected the Korean idol (*aidol*) system since the 2000s. Japan’s idol system, established during the country’s economically flourishing “bubble era” of the 1980s, is characterized by the significant role of entertainment management companies or agencies that maximize the commercial value of their own idols via multiple media platforms and loyal fan-bases (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012). A major K-pop corporation SM Entertainment has actively accommodated J-pop’s idol system as shown in the case of BoA, who was trained through the J-pop system and enjoyed stardom in South Korea and Japan. In this manner, the South Korean music industry has heavily been influenced by its Japanese counterpart even after the Liberation (Jung, 2009).

Western and Japanese influences on the emergence of global K-pop offer an intriguing case study for postcolonial media studies. Global K-pop might be an example of “mimicry”, the concept that some postcolonial theorists, such as Bhabha, appropriate to explain the colonized desire “for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). In postcolonial South Korea, the traces of two colonizing forces—Japanese and American powers—had to be denied, yet were already inscribed in South Korea’s media texts, industry, and audiences. In particular, American media content has been considered not only as high quality, cultural material but also as liberating and youthful commodities, which are often compared to a neo-Confucian cultural atmosphere in Korea. Historically, among South Koreans, America has been signified as a liberator that freed the country from its colonial power-Japan- since the US Army Military Government’s ruling (1945–1950) (Kim & Won, 2008). Choi (1993) has seen South Koreans’ attitude to America as “a colonial pathology” as follows:

South Koreans have lived on the same edge of both colonial and (post)colonial borderland. As the people of South Korea acquired a detailed sense of distinction

according to the property of Western symbolic capital, which South Koreans have neither the resources to produce nor the cultural taste to appreciate, they adopted Western cultural ancestry as their very own. (...) (post)colonial South Koreans have continued to mimic Western hegemonic culture and have reproduced a colonial pathology of self-denigration and self-marginalization, which have long blinded the South Koreans from critically assessing their “liberator-benefactor” as a colonizing hegemon. (pp. 82–83)

Since the legacy of colonizing powers has been so pervasive and persistent in realms of everyday life in Korea, it might not be surprising that Koreanness in K-pop has remained ambiguous. Indeed, Fuhr (2015, p. 118) suggests that K-pop contains limited “images for representing Korea’s identity” and instead adopts the “American retro images” to “serve as substitutes for Korea’s own power cultural repository.” In this respect, citing Fredric Jameson’s postmodern theory, Fuhr (2015) even describes the “absence of K” in K-pop as a symptom of “nostalgia for a historical past that never existed”.

However, postcolonial hybridity inscribed in K-pop does not simply mean the disappearance or absence of Koreanness. On the contrary, the textual and contextual aspects of K-pop may reveal Korea’s postcolonial desire for generating national signifiers to ensure its identity as a lately established nation-state. For example, despite the increasing recruiting of overseas talents, K-pop stars have presented themselves (and have been represented by the media) as “national idols” by emphasizing their role in enhancing national pride (Lee, 2012). For example, 2012’s YouTube sensation Psy, the K-pop singer, shouted in Korean, “*Daehanminguk Manse!* (The Republic of Korea, hurrah!)” during his appearance on NBC’s Today Show (Shin, 2013, pp. 157–158). Psy’s response may not only show his national pride but also how the Gangnam Style phenomenon, and the global rise of K-pop in general, is consumed and signified amongst Korean audiences and news media. That is, the global recognition of K-pop has triggered a nationalistic response in the country of origin, where overseas consumption of Korean made cultural products is often attributed to the excellence and uniqueness of Korean culture.

The South Korean national news media discourse of global K-pop within South Korea has attempted to essentialize its national culture as a key attraction in the global media market. For South Koreans, the global recognition of K-pop is utilized as a way to affirm its collective national identity and nationalism. The recent pop cultural nationalism can be understood in the historical context of Korean nationalism, which “was formed in response to Japanese colonial racism and assimilation and later developed as the postcolonial national identity” (Kal, 2011, p. 122). In this respect, it is not surprising that consecutive South Korean governments have used K-pop as a symbolic tool to reinforce the cultural hegemony of the ruling regimes on the one hand and as a national brand or “soft power” to facilitate overseas recognition of South Korean products and culture on the other. For example, during her several overseas trips, President Park (2013–) has met and encouraged K-pop stars on their global tours, as she claims to be dedicated to “cultural diplomacy” (Kang, 2016).

In this manner, K-pop is an ambiguous yet highly exploited signifier for South Koreans who have struggled to generate a cultural identity due to their postcolonial histories. However, K-pop’s textual nature as a pastiche (if not parody) of Western and Japanese pop musical styles has been a reason for some critics’ scepticism about the global penetration of K-pop (Fuhr, 2015). However, from a postcolonial perspective, K-pop may imply the “excess or slippage produced

by the ambivalence of mimicry” (Bhabha, 1994: 123). In other words, although K-pop may seem like a sheer pastiche or imitation of Western and Japanese texts, its effects can subvert the Western hegemony in global pop music industries and consumption. Indeed, a few scholars and critics have claimed that K-pop can be seen as a signal of postcolonial subversion. For example, Shim (2006, p.40) defines Korean media industry in the 21st century as “a sign of resilience of the subaltern”, and Ono & Kwon (2013) see K-pop as a hybrid culture through which the subaltern can speak and challenge Westernizing and colonizing forces. Indeed, as Ono & Kwon (2013) suggest, the global distribution of K-pop can be seen as a signal of how a music form from the non-West (if not the periphery) appropriate a global platform for challenging the dominant flow of pop music distribution. Indeed, the K-pop music industry has widely exploited YouTube and other global social media platforms as an effective way to disseminate its products and to increase its revenues (Jung, 2015). These distribution and consumption patterns of global K-pop may show how national or local stakeholders challenge the media’s imperialistic forces, which were evident in the second half of the 20th century and have re-emerged in the new media era (Jin, 2013).

The global rise of K-pop may provide a case study to challenge the universalized narrative in media studies in which the West is contrasted with the stereotyped rest and to show the ongoing effects of colonial power in a global mediascape. However, despite the recent analysis addressing K-pop industries’ and texts’ postcolonial aspects (Jin, 2016; Ono & Kwon; Shim, 2006), there have been few studies that examine how the postcoloniality inscribed in K-pop might be recognized and or challenged by global audiences, and how global K-pop audiences might embody postcolonial subjectivities in their particular locations of reception. Moreover, the literature has not sufficiently addressed how K-pop can be re-signified in a non-Korean context where the text’s postcoloniality may be dislocated. Thus, further empirical analyses of the global audiencehood of K-pop are required.

Consuming Global K-pop

The family stays in close touch with relatives, mostly via Facebook. They know that daily bombings continue in their neighbourhood from those updates, as well as from the TV in their living room, which is usually set to an Arabic channel. For now, this is the only media Mr. Jawish can consume, but with English classes, he anticipates that will soon change. (...) When Mr. Jawish leaves the house at about 4:30 p.m. for a doctor’s appointment, Alysar [the daughter] is quick to grab the TV remote to load up her favourite music video, No Other, by the Korean boy band Super Junior. Her handle on English is still shaky, but she has memorized the lyrics to several K-pop songs. (Bascaramurty & Kullab, 2015)

This recent Canadian newspaper’s coverage of a Syrian refugee family’s settlement in Canada incidentally gives us a glimpse into the ways in which K-pop might be primarily consumed in the West as well as who may be consuming it. Above all, the story of Alysar shows that diasporic youth on the transnational move become enthusiastic about K-pop without necessarily being interested in Western pop culture. In addition, the story implies that K-pop has been globalized through digital technology with which music is conveniently remediated as a visual form.

While global K-pop’s postcolonial traces may be inscribed in the histories of its production and in the hybrid nature of its textual characteristics, the traces are also observed in

the ways that K-pop is consumed overseas. In Alysar's story above, two aspects of consumption seem to stand out—audience groups' subalternity and their re-appropriation of global technologies. That is, the text of K-pop, which emerged from South Korea's postcolonial historical context, is re-signified by the fans who assume such marginal subject positions as immigrants, refugees, diasporic individuals, and/or ethnic minorities in a transnational context. In this process, a Western-developed media platform (YouTube in particular) is appropriated to negotiate with the hegemonic media system, in which mainstream Western pop music is prioritized over other music forms.

To explore the postcolonial traces in K-pop consumption, this section examines the narratives of young diasporic fans of K-pop in the Canadian context. As part of a pilot study of a larger project on the K-pop phenomenon across Canada (2015–2016), semi-structured interviews with 19 young K-pop fans in Canada (excluding those of Korean heritage) were analyzed. The interview participants, who were recruited in the Canadian provinces of Ontario and British Columbia, were primarily young Asian Canadians under the age of 30 (18 female and one male). Most of them were university or high school students with a few exceptions. Drawing on the interview data, this section focuses on K-pop fandom's subalternity and overseas fans' technology appropriation, both of which may imply certain challenges to the Western hegemony in global cultural flows.

Subaltern Audiencehood

As the officially used Canadian term “visible minorities” (those who are neither Caucasian nor Aboriginal) implies, non-White Canadians are identified as minorities who are subject to visible classification, often accompanied by grouping and stereotypes, in opposition to White individuals (Karim, 1993). According to Asian Canadian audiences in the study, K-pop's performers—Korean idol stars—were especially attractive. K-pop might be seen as an alternative to the hegemonic discourse of Whiteness in Canadian media, where ethnic minorities remain marginalized (Mahtani, 2008). A 21 year-old respondent of Chinese heritage, who was born and grew up in Canada noted:

(I like K-pop idols) because they are Asians. When I was growing up, whenever I saw TV shows, if it had any Asian character, then it doesn't matter whether it's Korean, Japanese, or Chinese. “Oh, that's my favorite character! They are Asians! (...) K-pop idols are singing, dancing, getting famous, and they are much more identifiable. (Interviewee 11)

In this manner, many respondents felt personally close to Asian personalities—K-pop idols, who were different from White personalities often shown on mainstream TV. As pointed out by the respondents, Asian personalities on Canadian TV seem to be under-represented or negatively represented. The ongoing operation of the dominant White ideology implicated in national policies and media (Mahtani, 2008) may work in parallel with the marginalization of people of color in the global media system (Fleras, 2011).

It may not be a coincidence that relatively marginalized members of Western audiences constitute an enthusiastic fandom of global K-pop. As suggested by recent empirical studies (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015; Yoon & Jin, 2016), the overseas audience of K-pop may not be fully addressed without discussing the role of the subaltern groups who struggle for cultural recognition in the White dominant cultural landscape. In particular, Choi & Maliangkay (2015,

p.14) define global K-pop fans as “cultural subaltern” groups, who might share the “sentiments of minority solidarity.” According to postcolonial media studies, the subaltern is defined as subordinate social groups, such as ethnic minorities, whose agency is negated yet reclaimed in the media (Cere, 2011, p. 10). Subaltern audiences are subject to the marginalization of their cultural tastes and identities.

The subaltern aspect of media consumption was observed amongst the project’s research participants. For example, a 17-year-old interviewee of Chinese heritage (Interviewee 2) felt that some of her non-Asian peers did not respect her taste for K-pop: “Sometimes they’re just not that open minded to receive new kinds of knowledge or information about different cultures. And sometimes they stop me from talking to them (about K-pop)”. Similarly, a 21-year-old woman of Pakistani heritage (Interviewee 7) described how K-pop is reduced to a stereotype. She noted, “[people think] ‘it’s just like a bunch of girly looking guys’ and then, ‘they’re just dancing around and they have a lot of makeup and like, basically, yeah they were like copying the 90s popular (American) boy bands.’” In this manner, as the research participants’ enthusiasm about K-pop was often marginalized as an Asian ethnic taste, K-pop seemed to be considered as the racialized Other of Western pop culture in Canada.

The marginalized status of K-pop might resonate with young Asian Canadians’ everyday experiences as ethnic minorities. While young Asian Canadians may seek multiple senses of belonging (Song, 2003), they tend to be othered by the White gaze. Unlike the white youth who might be able to perform symbolic ethnicity, Asian youth may be unable to “slip in and out of ‘being ethnic’” (Kibria, 2002, p.101). Global K-pop fandom involved a process of feeling good about themselves and their ethnic backgrounds by being connected with other Asian youth. A 29-year-old woman of Filipina heritage recalled how K-pop facilitated her Asian peer networks:

I took my first trip without my family to Asia to stay with a friend that I met through K pop. And so, after that, I would travel around Asia more so, I started meeting new people. (...) It would just happen that we’d meet at a hostel and we would just talk about stuff and then be like “oh you like K-pop too” and then we would become friends.

In this manner, K-pop stimulated diasporic young Asian people’s sense of a pan-Asian identity. Participation in K-pop fandom appeared to offer some interviewees an enhanced cultural agency with which they could seek a positive self-identity. Global K-pop performed by young Korean idols might offer the interviewees resources for empowering their racialized body and identity.

Given that “visible minorities” – youth of Asian heritage in particular – appear to constitute the center of K-pop’s fan base in Canada, it is necessary to discuss how and why K-pop is particularly appealing to subaltern audiences. While the respondents in the present study identified its hybrid nature as an enchanting factor of K-pop, they enjoyed K-pop as a form of “doing” or practice. In particular, those who were involved in cover dance groups often praised the verve of K-pop performance. “Their (K-pop bands’) choreography is always really difficult and strong, so it just makes an impact. (...) they’re able to make a choreography for every song and I feel like that’s a really hard thing to do, so it’s really, a praiseworthy thing,” noted a member of a K-pop cover dance team (Interviewee 7). The act of performing a K-pop cover dance was described as a process through which the young Asian Canadians might positively engage with their body and that might eventually lead to their self-expression in urban space. In some cases, they digitally recorded their performance and/or competed with other cover dance

teams. Also, some respondents occasionally organized flash mobs or other offline events. In doing so, they territorialized and re-appropriated urban space, which might otherwise remain meaningless for the racialized youth. While consuming K-pop itself might not necessarily “guarantee any form of resistance” (Grossberg, 1992, p. 64), the subaltern subjects’ appropriation of K-pop may enable the fan to symbolically resist the dominant social order and to reimagine their own cultural identity. In the present study, young fans’ cultural consumption as a process of negotiating their subaltern positions through re-appropriation of transnational cultural form can be seen as an implicit cultural resistance that contributes to creating “new language, meanings, and vision of the future” (Duncome 2002, p. 8).

Re-appropriating Western Technologies

The respondents’ narratives on their consumption of K-pop revealed an extensive use of social media and an increasing tendency of media convergence. In particular, social media appears to allow for playful, low-cost, and socially networked processes of cultural consumption through which a particular cultural economy of fandom is generated and maintained. An 18-year-old woman’s account shows how overseas fans access and consume K-pop. This interviewee explained, “If I’m on Facebook, and Allkpop releases some news about a music release, I go to YouTube and watch the music video, or listen to the song. And then I download it, off a blog. I don’t buy it (laughs). I download it” (Interviewee 5). As illustrated in this account, the consumption of K-pop did not necessarily involve purchasing materials but rather comprised digital navigating, sharing, and downloading. For example, a fan (Interviewee 7) noted, “We do have a lot of online Facebook groups that we are in. So, people share music videos and we’ll talk about, or they play these games like guess who’s this and whatever”. In this manner, K-pop music videos were consumed via social media, through which information and emotion were playfully shared. However, this global consumption pattern of K-pop has been considered a challenge for K-pop industries because of the pervasive piracy and personal reproduction of original K-pop products (Jin, 2015).

This digital sharing economy of K-pop fandom is heavily reliant on Western-dominant new media platforms. Among other social media channels, the globally dominant digital platform YouTube has played a particularly important role in circulating K-pop music videos and boosting its global fan base. For many respondents, consuming K-pop meant not only listening or viewing, but also “doing” K-pop on YouTube. For example, a 17-year-old woman, who was a member of a K-pop cover dance group, pointed out the importance of participating in K-pop and reworking K-pop materials.

Whenever I see something I really like, I just want to create videos for them like for me. I do dancing, I put dance covers, sometimes review videos, or music video reactions, and stuff like that. So it’s kind of a skills challenge for me as well to edit in such a short period of time and put it out there for other people to enjoy as well. And, um, it’s kind of just K-pop is just my source of life to be cheesy (laughs). It’s like... yeah it’s my daily activities that revolve around K-pop a lot. (Interviewee 2: 17 yrs, female, Chinese Canadian)

In this interviewee’s “doing” K-pop, YouTube, sometimes along with other social media platforms, appeared to function as an effective means through which her fan activities are recorded, reflected, and shared. Her account seems to resonate with Ono & Kwon’s (2013) study

on the role of YouTube in K-pop fan culture as a platform offering opportunities for postcolonial subjects to facilitate multidirectional media flows through which the Western dominant media system can be reoriented. That is, YouTube, which is a dominant Western-produced media platform, could paradoxically be appropriated as a means of challenging the Western-oriented media markets. YouTube may show a new phase of media imperialism and has been named “platform imperialism,” which refers to Western dominance in technological development and the infrastructure of media platforms (Jin, 2013). However, Ono & Kwon (2013) argue that Western-owned and controlled media platforms can be utilized by postcolonial media producers and audiences, and thus eventually be appropriated to strike back at the Western hegemony.

K-pop fans’ re-appropriation of the Western media platform can be observed in reaction videos and user created content on YouTube. In the present study, several respondents often uploaded their own reaction videos and/or cover-dance/cover-song videos on YouTube. As an interviewee noted, fans may generate or watch K-pop reaction videos “because you wanna see if they had the same reaction as you did. So if they were also shocked or they also like the music just as much as you did” (Interviewee 7). Reaction videos may be an extended mode of the culture of commenting on or reviewing the original text. However, compared to other forms of consumer review activities, reaction videos have unique features comprising a visual performance and the appearance of commenters along with particular aesthetics – such as the ordinary, natural, and self-immersed nature of video texts (Kim, 2015, p. 336). Also, reaction videos tend to involve particular desires for, and sensibilities of, K-pop fandom, as they can generate a sense of belonging beyond geographic or cultural distance. As an interviewee below noted, reaction videos might contribute to spreading K-pop to global Internet users, and to enhancing a sense of an imagined community of K-pop fans:

When people make reaction videos, they have the video of themselves and a little screen for the music video [that they react to]. So, it kind of promotes the music video as well, if you haven’t watched the music video. And it also gives some people the feeling of “Oh, they [i.e. reaction video uploaders] want to watch it with someone, but they can’t really do so”. So, it’s like, having a sense of belonging. So, they watch it to watch it indirectly with other people. (Interviewee 2: 17 yrs, female, Chinese Canadian)

In this manner, the creators and viewers of reaction videos seem to participate in such activities as promoting and talking about their favourite music videos and exploring how others think of the video across different cultural and linguistic contexts. In so doing, they compare their own interpretation with others’ reactions and seek a sense of belonging in an imaginary way.

The popular circulation of reaction videos may have implications for understanding the consumption of global K-pop as a postcolonial process. Above all, fans’ playful participation in reaction videos has facilitated the rise of K-pop as a set of non-Western cultural texts on a global scale, moving beyond the typical national gatekeepers of transcultural cultural commodities such as broadcast media (Kim, 2015). Moreover, in the K-pop culture of reaction videos, which encourages playful re-engagement with the original text, grassroots translation of other culture becomes a main activity of cultural consumption. “Doing” K-pop via online platforms suggests that the post-colonial hybridity inscribed in the text and traces of K-pop can even be further hybridized by various participants who are networked via social media. The increasing process of YouTube-mediated translation implies that K-pop fans do not simply receive and decode the

original text, but rather regenerate it from their own perspectives. As Fiske (1992) claimed, pop cultural consumption to some extent resembles high-brow cultural consumption, which relies on cultural hierarchies between haves and have-nots in terms of cultural capital. However, K-pop fans' participatory culture of reaction and grassroots translation might, in a way, dismantle the cultural hierarchies within fan communities. Thus, by doing K-pop on YouTube, fans may engage with a "subaltern standpoint," which refers to the social position, experiences, and viewpoint of peripheral groups (Go, 2016: 159). Indeed, as Kim (2015) implies, the participatory culture of K-pop reaction videos might allow the reactors to question Western oriented norms and to be keenly aware of cultural diversity to some extent, while sharing and viewing different reactions.

However, while YouTube and reaction videos play a significant role in the rise of global K-pop fandom, this does not necessarily mean that K-pop fans always consider the increasing reaction videos as a positive participatory culture. Several respondents, who were not particularly interested in viewing or generating reaction videos, disdained the cultural ignorance allegedly observed in K-pop reaction videos. These fans were particularly critical about younger YouTubers who produced reaction videos and were seemingly ignorant about the cultural context of K-pop. A 20-year-old respondent (Interviewee 6) described, "There are a bunch of Americans and people who weren't used to K-pop. Their expression were 'weird, colourful' or like 'an explosion of randomness.'" Also, an 18-year-old Vietnamese Canadian fan (Interviewee 5) described reaction video enthusiasts as "outsiders" while claiming that those uploaders might not be sufficiently knowledgeable about K-pop: "I don't like to watch reaction videos. It's because they're obviously...most of these people are outsiders, right? Teens React, for example, right? They say comments that I don't like. I tend to avoid things like that." In this manner, some of this study's fans, who considered themselves as highly dedicated fans, tended to distinguish themselves from "outsiders" or K-pop novices, who make reaction videos. This critical view, contrasted with the view suggested by aforementioned reaction video enthusiasts, implies that K-pop fans' engagement with social media is not necessarily always participatory, but rather diverse (or even contradictory). That is, some fans playfully use social media to react to original texts as their practice of "doing K-pop", while others disregarded amateurish content generated by other fans. The fans' different reactions to K-pop reaction videos show how popular social media platforms, such as YouTube, can be appropriated for different meanings—for example, the reproduction of the Western gaze and challenges to this gaze. The contradictory re-appropriation of social media implies that its seemingly open platform, which is typically provided to its users for free, is not necessarily a neutral space for subaltern media audiences.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how a cultural form emerging from a postcolonial context can be re-signified and re-appropriated as a means of cultural negotiation for subaltern groups. It has analyzed global K-pop as a cultural practice that implies postcolonial legacies and struggles in media production and consumption. On its production side, the K-pop industry as a semi-peripheral export market in global capitalism has generated the "idol system," in which Western genre music is localized by young Korean performers and then globally distributed through social media-driven fan bases. As an industrial endeavor of South Korea, the K-pop industry has increasingly assumed a semi-peripheral role in the global music industry system by relentlessly attempting to export its products through Western dominant media outlets (Oh, 2013). The idol system has reproduced copy-cat boy/girl groups, while embracing the Western cultural paradigm

(Unger, 2015, p. 25). The K-pop industry's idol manufacturing system has relied on the exploitation of (mostly local) labor powers including not only young idol stars but also a large number of "trainees" and potential trainees (as industrial reserves), who struggle with long work hours and highly intensive emotional labor. Given K-pop's exploitative production system and its semi-peripheral position in the global music industry, it might be still early to suggest that K-pop is generating an alternative media production system that challenges global capitalism.

Meanwhile, K-pop is integrated into young fans' daily contexts of "doing" pop music. Young fans in this study – those who assume subaltern audience positions in the Canadian mediascape – consumed K-pop via emerging media platforms, such as YouTube and Facebook. K-pop fans' extensive use of social media, such as YouTube, shows that Western-based platforms are re-appropriated for the circulation of non-Western media content and the formation of particular pop cultural capital. The playful participatory culture exercised especially by cover dance groups and reaction video uploaders might imply a postcolonial moment, in which the colonized perform their resistance and thus destabilize the colonizer's authority. Indeed, "visible minorities" K-pop fans in the present study seemed to question the Western-oriented mediascape to some extent, while primarily relying on the Western-based platform of YouTube for "doing" K-pop.

Furthermore, by critically examining how the participatory culture of K-pop is facilitated by and integrated into social media platforms, the social effects of "doing K-pop" can be further explored. In the technological environment of participatory K-pop fandom, the fans' cognitive or immaterial labor is encouraged without any financial rewards, and, as a consequence, platform providers gain the profits through user-targeted advertisements and data collection in an attention economy (Kim, 2015). In this regard, while "doing" K-pop might involve the cultural expressions of subaltern audiences, the process might not be free from the cultural influence of Western-based media platforms and the commodification of users behaviors accelerated by global capitalism.

By examining the production and consumption of global K-pop, this chapter has presented a preliminary effort to explore the meaning of K-pop in media globalization from a postcolonial perspective. Further studies are required to investigate the nature of postcoloniality in K-pop as a media production system and as a mode of participatory consumption. While there is a need for further studies and debates, the global circulation of K-pop suggests how Western oriented history of media practices can be deconstructed and thus different histories can be reinstated (Shome, 2016).

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