

Global Imagination of K-Pop: Pop Music Fans' Lived Experiences of Cultural Hybridity

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Abstract

Drawing on qualitative interviews with Canadian-based K-pop (contemporary South Korean “idol pop” music) fans, this study discusses how transnational fans experience and interpret K-pop as a form of cultural hybridity that facilitates global imagination. In particular, the study explores how fans consume and translate transnational pop music while engaging with different modes of global imagination in their everyday lives. In so doing, the study contributes to a better understanding of the text and context of K-pop from the lens of audiences’ negotiation with globalization.

Keywords: K-pop (South Korean idol pop music); pop music fan; hybridity; global imagination; Canadian youth

Introduction

Transnational pop music allows its audiences to engage with different modes of global imagination, through which globalization is interpreted and negotiated at the level of everyday life. In particular, the global imagination facilitated by pop music may reveal the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization (Appadurai 29–30), as it often involves desires for Westernized ways of life, but can provide audiences with scripts for diverse possible lives. Furthermore, the increasing transnational mobility of media and audiences has complicated pop music consumption’s patterns and directions. The recent rise of K-pop (contemporary South Korean “idol pop” music) shows how a pop culture-mediated global imagination can be generated not only from the West but also from non-Western contexts. In this respect, drawing on in depth interviews, this study explores how Canadian-based audiences experience and interpret the emerging cultural form of K-pop and its hybridity. It does not simply address K-pop’s *textual* attributes but also its audiences’ *lived experiences* as they consume this transnational pop music. Thus, it examines how this new form of cultural flow is negotiated by overseas audiences who have to undergo cultural translation.

While “K-pop” can refer to South Korean-made pop music in general, the notion of K-pop emphasizes a particular aspect of contemporary South Korean pop music as “pop music made in South Korea for non-Korea” (Shin, “Gayo”). That is, K-pop has been a globalizing “project” (Shin, “Have You”) of contemporary South Korean “idol pop” music characterized by its particular formula – featuring young, same-sex idol groups, and stressing physical attractiveness, catchy refrains, and signature dance moves (Lie and Oh 349–351). In the production and global dissemination of K-pop, the role of entertainment corporations (*gihoeksa*) as “strong gate keepers” has been substantial in exploring and maintaining “a strategic international business export model of high quality and low price” (Oh and Lee 55). These corporations, which include the big three companies SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment, have introduced a highly integrated “in house” star training and management

system. Reportedly, the talent management system, which is often called the “idol system,” is a result of the localization of the Japanese pop industry’s idol (*idolu*) system that especially flourished in the 1980s (D. Lee; Lie and Oh; Marx).

In global music industries, foreign music tends to be introduced and consumed in the “world music” niche market, where this music is imagined as the distant, exotic, and authentic other of Western pop music (Conell and Gibson). K-pop may not necessarily fit the world music category, as it exhibits a high level of cultural hybridity, whereby its place of origin is intentionally obfuscated and Western pop music styles are extensively re-appropriated (Epstein and Turnbull; Jin and Ryoo; Kim; Lie). Arguably, K-pop is a result of the South Korean music industry’s vigorous efforts to emulate Western music (Shin, “Gayo”).

K-pop’s recent flow has been analyzed as a global phenomenon beyond South Korea and Asian contexts (Jin), and thus globalization has been considered a “keyword that characterizes the aesthetic dimension and the underlying production strategies of K-pop” (Fuhr 10). Whereas globalization has shaped K-pop and its overseas rise, K-pop may increasingly generate particular forms of global imagination. The global visibility of K-pop illustrates how a local musical form, which has gone through phases of “catching up the West” (Howard), has evolved as a cultural resource for global imagination for overseas audiences (Lie). However, despite growing scholarly attention to K-pop as a transnational cultural form, there is little empirical research on Western-based audiences’ reception of K-pop. In particular, there is a lack of studies about how the hybrid nature of K-pop as a transnational emulation of Western pop music is negotiated by Canadian-based audiences and what types of global imagination emerge in their transnational consumption. Thus, this study explores how transnational fans experience K-pop as a form of cultural hybridity that facilitates global imagination. By examining Canadian-based K-pop fans’ engagement with different modes of global imagination in their everyday lives, the study contributes to understanding the text and context of K-pop from the lens of audiences’ negotiation of globalization.

Theorizing the Hybridity of K-pop

As K-pop is a relatively new musical form in global media industries, there have been debates about how to define, and theorize about, K-pop. While the cultural form has been analyzed from several different angles in the context of cultural globalization debates, one of the main axes of analysis is its relation to Western pop music – American pop music in particular. Indeed, the global rise of K-pop cannot be analyzed without considering its “long and complex interaction with American culture” (Anderson 132). While the previous interaction was rather one directional – the South Korean music industry’s imitation of Western music styles – the recent interaction is more complicated and multidirectional. Media studies scholars have recently defined the phenomenal rise of K-pop as “a way to counter the threat of the Western-dominated media market” (S. Lee 12). However, identifying K-pop as counterevidence of Westernization does not necessarily mean portraying it as a simple reverse of media imperialism (Shim). Rather, given that K-pop’s musical style has been significantly indebted to that of American pop music, it is important to ask how K-pop has evolved as a hybrid cultural form that involves ambiguities and lacks a sense of place (or origin) (S. Jung). In this respect, it is not surprising that media studies scholars have frequently applied the notion of hybridity to analyze the K-pop phenomenon. Indeed, apart from a few scholars exploring “authentic” (or traditional) cultural elements in K-pop (e.g., Hughes and Keith; Kim and Kim), most scholars have defined K-pop as a form of global hybrid culture (e.g., Fuhr; Lie; Jin; S. Jung; E-Y. Jung, “Transnational Korea”).

This tendency may resonate with the growing consensus in media and cultural studies that “global culture is hybrid, mixing heterogeneous elements into recombinant forms” (Kraidy 45).

Cultural hybridity theories have been welcomed as an alternative to the media imperialism thesis and/or the cultural homogenization thesis, which both fail to understand the dynamics between media users’ experiences and political economic structures (Kraidy; Ryoo). According to Kraidy and Murphy, hybridity in media studies can be defined as the “dual process of cultural fusion and fragmentation” (300). That is, hybrid means the fusion of “relatively distinct forms, styles, or identities, cross-cultural contact” (Kraidy 5) and the process of fragmentation through which a fixed notion of culture is challenged. The concept of hybridity has merits as a theoretical and conceptual framework because “theories of hybridity help us understand the local not merely as a locale, but as a crossroads of transcultural influence” (Kraidy and Murphy 304).

Drawing on the notion of cultural hybridity, which has been increasingly applied to analyze transnational or transcultural media consumption (Kraidy), media studies scholars have defined transnational K-pop as the latest example of cultural hybridization (Fuhr; Jin; E-Y. Jung, “Transnational Korea”; I. Oh; Ryoo). As Ryoo observed, K-pop appears to involve a dialectical and transformational force to generate “a creative form of hybridization working towards re-imagining regional identities through the reciprocal cultural exchanges in the global/local context” (147). In this manner, theories of hybridity attempt to explore the potential of “third space” where different cultural forces transform each other (Bhabha 56).

In recent literature, a few elements have been identified as evidence of increasing hybridity in K-pop – the frequent use of English and multi-cultural references in K-pop songs and music videos, K-pop artists’ physical and musical presentation, multi-national production teams, and an overseas fan-base (Jin and Ryoo; E-Y. Jung, “K-pop Idols”; Kim; Lie and Oh; C. Oh; I. Oh). However, existing studies have provided little empirical evidence of K-pop’s hybridity as a signal of “third space” in which the understanding of culture as a homogenizing force is fundamentally challenged (Bhabha 54). They tentatively conclude that K-pop functions as a “pastiche” (Unger 27), a “knock-off (or *jjaktung* in Korean)” (Shin, “Gayo” 59–60), “multicultural mutant” (C. Oh 69), or “well-packaged hybridity” (E-Y. Jung, “Transnational Korea” 78). For example, in an empirical analysis of cultural hybridity observed in English mixing in K-pop, Jin and Ryoo argue that K-pop’s hybridity operates only at the level of form and style “rather than establishing a new creative culture or a third space, one which is free from American influence.” (127). Similarly, in her examination of a K-pop idol group’s performance, C. Oh claims that hybridity in K-pop is “strongly tied to global capitalism’s exploitation of other cultures” (65), and thus the seemingly new femininity represented in K-pop performance reaffirms conventional Asian womanhood without having subversive implications.

Overall, with some variations, the empirical studies have tended to consider K-pop as a recent breed of cultural commodity developed in relation to the influence of Western pop culture. They have contributed to identifying the hybrid components of K-pop and their probable role in global imagination by analyzing how particular meanings are encoded and represented in K-pop. However, since their primary concern is K-pop’s *textual* features, they do not sufficiently explain how the encoded meanings are experienced and negotiated through K-pop fans’ lived culture in transnational contexts. Thus, in order to better explore “forces that shape different forms of hybridity” (Kraidy and Murphy 300) and “hybridity’s ability or inability to empower social groups” (Kraidy 151), further studies of audiences’ everyday experiences are required.

Research Methods

This article draws on qualitative interviews with K-pop fans in Canada conducted between May 2015 and June 2016. To obtain information from a range of K-pop fans, field studies were conducted in three research sites: metropolitan Toronto (a large multi-ethnic city with a population of over five millions, Toronto hereafter), metropolitan Vancouver (a large multi-ethnic city with a population of over two millions, Vancouver hereafter), and metropolitan Kelowna (a small Caucasian-dominated city with a population of under 0.2 millions; Kelowna hereafter). A total of 32 K-pop fans, who were recruited via online advertisements and snowballing, participated in individual or small group interviews (9 in Toronto, 5 in Vancouver, and 18 in Kelowna). In the following analysis sections, the participants will be identified by an interviewee number, which will be followed by their gender, age, ethnic background, and location.

The participants were mostly women with the exception of two men. The participants were between the ages of 16 and 29; for legal minors, parental consent was obtained, as well as informed consent. They were mostly long-term K-pop enthusiasts, as they were introduced to K-pop between three and 10 years ago. Several respondents, who were born and grew up in Asia before migration to Canada in their childhood or teens, were particularly committed to K-pop for approximately 10 years, and thus, their personal histories appeared to resonate with the history of K-pop as globalized “idol pop” music. The majority of the participants were ethnic minorities: twenty-eight Asians, four Caucasians, one Euro-Asian, and one African. As the study aims to examine the reception of K-pop amongst those who do not speak Korean and thus encounter linguistic and cultural barriers, K-pop fans of Korean heritage were excluded. In so doing, the study observed more directly the process of literal and cultural translations. The common demographic attributes of the participants – predominantly young women of Asian heritages – might be influenced by the recruiting process through which female research assistants of Asian backgrounds advertised the project and sought potential participants at their schools or fan clubs along with snowballing methods. Given the participants’ accounts, the sample’s demographic attributes might not be unrelated to the general population of Canadian-based K-pop fans. However, there has been no large-scale survey data on the general demographics of K-pop audiences in Canada.

In the individual semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, each participant was invited to talk freely about their thoughts on K-pop’s textual and contextual aspects. On the one hand, the participants addressed K-pop’s textual characteristics, and on the other hand, they discussed how K-pop is consumed and represented in Canadian and online contexts by commenting on relationships between K pop fans, stars, industries, and media.

Making Sense of Hybridity in K-pop

K-pop shows how Western pop music conventions and the Japanese idol music system are localized (Jin and Ryoo; Lie and Oh). K-pop is often defined by its fans as a blending of different texts and styles. K-pop fans in the present study did not deny the fact that American pop music styles are extensively adopted in K-pop. Most interviewees agreed on the highly hybrid nature of K-pop, while using several different terms such as “mixture” and “mashup.” For example, an interviewee commented:

I really like the Korean adaptation of Western music, or the style. I don’t really like a lot of

Western music fully, but when it's taken by Koreans who kind of re-interpret it, I really like it, I don't know what it is like, because they bring their own elements to it maybe, their own kind of flare. (Interviewee 22: male, 24 yrs, Caucasian, Vancouver)

In this manner, K-pop is considered to be a hybrid and creative reinterpretation of the Western music genre. Furthermore, according to the respondents, hybridity exists not only in similarity but also in simultaneity between American pop music and K-pop:

I don't know if you've heard about the whole controversy with Taylor Swift's "Bad Blood" music video and how it's identical to 2NE1 [K-pop girl band]'s "Come Back Home" video. And people were just like freaking out about it, saying Taylor Swift copied them [i.e. 2NE1] because their song came out first. So, I would definitely say that there're Westernized concepts in there for visuals [of K-pop], but I wouldn't be able to tell you if it was the North Americans copying or if it was the K-pop people copying. (Interviewee 28: female, 20 yrs, Vietnamese, Toronto)

As this interviewee compared two particular music videos, many K-pop fans in the study pointed out simultaneous and mutual influences between Western pop music and K-pop; a few interviewees compared K-pop with other Asian pop music (e.g., J-Pop and Chinese pop music), with which they had been familiar. They did not necessarily see qualitative difference between Western and South Korean pop music. The sense of hierarchy between original and hybrid texts might no longer exist among the fans. What matters more for the fans seems to be how to translate the text. K-pop was signified as a playful pop cultural form rather than as an export from South Korea. That is, the "K" (Koreanness) in K-pop was not always a significant symbolic marker that facilitates the fans' interest in and enthusiasm about Korean culture in general.

Some fans noticed that K-pop idols embodied particular Korean cultural attributes, which Kim and Kim called "the Korean ethos of collective moralism": K-pop idols' behaviors such as respect for their elders (*sunbae* in Korean) as Korean cultural characteristics. However, most interviewees had difficulty recognizing such Korean cultural attributes in K-pop's *text* – in its lyrics, visual concepts, and/or performance on stage. Rather, the textual aspects of K-pop were recognized as being highly modern and hybrid, and did not have much in common with the perceived elements of Korean culture.

The perceived absence of Koreanness in K-pop texts amongst fans implies that an emphasis on South Korea as the place of origin and on the country's exclusive ownership of K-pop might be a false approach to understanding this cultural phenomenon, as fans seem to seek "dispersed ownership" of K-pop and "transnational common" elements shaping global K-pop (Choi). This tendency also resonates with critics' arguments that, except for its artists' nationality, production system, and the music's primary language, K-pop is not highly associated with Korean cultural characteristics. Lie claims that "as a matter of traditional culture, there is almost nothing 'Korean' about K-pop" (360). The critics argue that, by attempting to remove Koreanness, K-pop has become a hybrid commodity that smoothly flows across national or regional borders (Lie). Indeed, major K-pop entertainment corporations have increasingly recruited multinational talents, including Korean American performers, and American/European producers and composers, during the process of penetrating into the global market. As a result, the K-pop industry in its production system and human resources has been significantly de-territorialized beyond the place of origin – South Korea (Lie and Oh).

K-pop's post-nationality, or "non-nationality", might have enhanced its transcultural mobility through "culturally neutral presentations" (S. Jung 18). However, the critics'

observation of cultural neutrality in K-pop may need further investigation for understanding how audiences negotiate K-pop's implicated "non-nationality" and furthermore engage with global imagination. Fans' appropriation of transnational pop music involves imagination, through which particular cultural meanings are generated and negotiated. Given that mediated imagination is not mere fantasy or escape, but rather a social practice involving the cultural dynamics of domination and resistance (Appadurai 31), Canadian-based fans' consumption of K-pop shows how globalization is experienced and negotiated in everyday life.

Among different scripts for possible lives facilitated by the global flow of K-pop, this study identifies three modes of global imagination, which were primarily addressed in the young fans' accounts. First, K-pop's hybrid nature seems to allow its overseas fans to easily re-appropriate their objects of fandom – K-pop music, video, performance, and idols. Hybrid elements of K-pop appear to reduce cultural barriers between the text and the overseas audience. Second, K-pop seems to facilitate a cosmopolitan imagination of globalization, as it allows the fans to challenge Western dominance in global media and cultural flows and to question the nationalistic voices of South Korean-based K-pop fans. Third, K-pop idols' images emphasizing cuteness and intimacy are consumed by their fans as a soft side of globalization. These three different, yet overlapping, modes of global imagination will respectively be addressed in the following three sections.

Imagination of Participatory Globalization

While trying to make sense of the hybrid cultural form, overseas K-pop fans in the study engaged with K-pop as a way of imagining the process of globalization. The fans experienced the K-pop mediated world as a participatory arena. As K-pop is a cultural item emerging from a cultural and linguistic context with which overseas audiences have not been familiar, the participatory process of translating and interpreting K-pop is inevitable and continuously required for its overseas consumption. Typically, the global flow of a local cultural form is likely to involve a level of "cultural discount" (Hoskins and Mirus) in its receiving end. That is, cultural products made in a national context are likely to have a reduced value and appeal elsewhere since international audiences find it difficult to identify with the style and values (Hoskins et al.). However, due to its high level of hybridity, K-pop might not entirely be foreign to its non-Korean audiences.

In particular, frequently used English mixing in K-pop shows how cultural hybridity might contribute to lowering cultural and linguistic barriers in transnational cultural flows and allowing the audience to actively decode and re-appropriate the text in polysemic ways. English in K-pop lyrics, known as "Engrish" among the fans, has been a signature of K-pop. Although Korean is the main language of most K-pop lyrics, K-pop songs have increasingly included English in their lyrics. English mixing in K-pop often means more than the adoption of English for song titles and band names, as a significant number of K-pop songs use English in their lyrics as a way of code switching between Korean and English. Typically, popular K-pop songs have the chorus part written in English, such as "oh, yeah," in between Korean written verses (Jin and Ryoo 125). Major K-pop stars have been trained to sing at least some songs in English for Western audiences (Shin, "Have You"). According to interview respondents, English in K-pop is sometimes or often out of context, grammatically inaccurate, and/or awkwardly pronounced. "Sometimes I hardly recognize the English lyrics in the [K-pop] songs. After listening to them, I don't even know that they are English", noted an interviewee (Interviewee 23: female, 20-yrs, Chinese, Vancouver). Another interviewee considered "Engrish" to be a way of covering and

imitating Western pop music.

When they [K-pop idols] do cover songs, which I appreciate, they're gonna do cover songs in English, because international fans generally really enjoy that. They sometimes change the lyrics, and I don't know if they do it because it's hard for them to pronounce those words or they want to interpret it differently, but as an international fan, if I was hearing someone singing Journey's "Open Arms" and changing part of the chorus, I would be like, weirded out, because, if you're trying to do a cover, you should still follow it closely. (Interviewee 24: female, 29 yrs, Filipino, Toronto)

Such a view might be similar to the Western media's coverage of K-pop as an "inauthentic" imitation of Western music (e.g. Sontag).

However, "Engrish" appears to have more benefits than drawbacks among K-pop fans. English lyrics were often helpful for the interviewees, none of whom was a native Korean speaker, as the familiar language (English) reduced a language barrier: "When there's an English [lyric], it's easier to say in a concert, you can shout out the lyrics. That's easier to follow and you know where the song starts and ends I guess", noted an interviewee (Interviewee 21: female, 19 yrs, Chinese, Vancouver). Another interviewee also commented:

Because international fans like me don't look up the lyrics, we'll know those two sentences in English. Those are the part of the song that we'll sing. The rest of the song could be like na-na-na [i.e. a humming] (...). However, I must say, it's often kind of irritating when there is bad grammar in those two sentences [written in English] (Interviewee 24: female, 29 yrs, Filipino, Toronto).

The use of English in K-pop has more than linguistic benefits for overseas audiences, as it constitutes a unique playful characteristic of K-pop, whereby fans can distinguish their taste from others. An interviewee noted:

At first it [i.e. English mixing] was weird, but now it's got its own uniqueness. Like, "Shoot Anonymous" [i.e. lyrics from the K-pop boy band EXO-K's song Mama]. So us as native English speakers find it funny. It [i.e. the song Mama] could be a really serious song, and all of a sudden there is the "Engrish". I kind of like that they're implementing English into there, because it means that they're kind of more accepting towards international, rather than just staying in within their own confine (Interviewee 1: female, 23 yrs, Caucasian, Kelowna).

This interviewee added that "Engrish" in K-pop might be even offensive to those who had never listened to K-pop before. She implied that "Engrish" was appropriated as a means by which K-pop fans could distinguish themselves from non-fans. Indeed, most fans in the study enjoyed, and played with, the "Engrish" as a particular way of expressing their emotions and togetherness. Regardless of its literal meanings, English mixing in K-pop lyrics seems to invite global fans to a "community of imagination", constructed through "a common affective engagement" (Hills 180).

The fans' play with English might resonate with Jin and Ryoo's observation of English mixing in K-pop as an element of "the playfulness accompanying the convergence of multilingual ingredients" (128). Due to the importance of the playful utility of "Engrish" among the fans, the transnational pop music fans did not necessarily seek literal translation of their favorite K-pop songs and music videos. While fan-supplied translations are increasingly

available on online fan sites, K-pop fans in the study were interested in enjoying the atmosphere facilitated by the linguistic hybridity in K-pop music videos and songs rather than seeking line-by-line translations.

K-pop's texts have been characterised by their "multiple points of entry," which facilitate audiences' participation (Takacs 130). An increasing number of K-pop reaction videos and parodies, online fan fora, and numerous grassroots K-pop cover dance groups have been cited as evidence of fans' re-appropriation of, and interaction with, original texts (Hu; Lee and Kuwahara). In particular, K-pop has quickly been adapted to social media environments as shown in the K-pop industry's vigorous distribution of its content via YouTube (Oh and Lee). Thus, K-pop's textual hybridity could be effectively remixed and spread via social media, which have contributed to forming a technologically networked, global fan base (E-Y. Jung, "K-Pop Idols"). Global K-pop fans' participation have played a significant role in the translation and introduction of K-pop texts to non-Korean audiences, and also affected the global market expansion of K-pop.

Overall, the hybrid nature of K-pop allows its fans to easily participate in, and play with, their objects of fandom. Moreover, social media, such as Twitter, facilitates banal routes through which the fans can communicate with idols and other fans, and participate in the world of K-pop. However, while fans' participation in the global dissemination and translation of K-pop can be considered a "productive" way of consuming culture (Fiske), the nature of social media-driven participation might need to be further scrutinized. As critical Internet studies have suggested, fans' participation might be merely "digital labor" or "fan labor" in which individual users are continuously subject to media platforms' exploitation of user created data under the guise of "participation" (Fuchs). Although fan labor has played a significant role in grassroots translations of K-pop lyrics, the labor might be commodified in the form of an "audience commodity" (Smythe) – audiences not simply as consumers of media content, but rather as the primary commodity of media for potential advertisers and platform providers (Oh and Lee).

Imagination of Cosmopolitan Globalization

As discussed in the previous section, K-pop fans utilize K-pop as a cultural resource for re-imagining globalization. K-pop-mediated global imagination also allows fans to penetrate the social *context* of how K-pop is represented and consumed. By consuming K-pop, the fans could desire an inclusive mode of globalization based on the imagination of an egalitarian space of individual fans – similar to what some critics referred to as "cosmopolitan" globalization (e.g., Beck). The global consumption of K-pop might provide its non-Korean fans with opportunities to reimagine cultural flows beyond the Western-oriented process of globalization. As suggested in a recent study of K-pop cover dancers in Singapore, global K-pop fans seem to reinterpret and re-appropriate the text of K-pop from their own experiences and locations, and thus engage in a vernacular and organic mode of cosmopolitanism (Liew). As further discussed below, on the one hand the interviewees coped with the Western-oriented media environment and public perception of pop music, and on the other South Korean-based fans' claimed ownership and pride over K-pop as *their* cultural item.

First, K-pop fans challenged the hegemony of Western (American) pop culture, whereby their cultural tastes for K-pop were marginalized. They pointed out the ways that the public and mainstream media stereotyped K-pop and its fans. Indeed, Western critics and journalists accuse K-pop idol groups of a lack of musical originality and authenticity. For example, a prominent American magazine described K-pop idol groups as "being too robotic to make it in the West",

while defining them as manufactured products in a factory-like system (Seabrook). While the stereotyping of K-pop was occasionally repeated in the accounts of a few K-pop fans in the study, overall the fans tended to question the Western media's simplistic representation of K-pop. They emphasized diversity in genres and styles within K-pop (even within K-pop idol groups/systems) and the versatility of K-pop idols. For example, a 20-year-old woman disapproved of such simplistic media representations:

If K-pop artists aren't real musicians, I could say the same about Drake, Taylor Swift, One Direction, or Justin Bieber. None of them write their own music. They barely write their own music. And they don't choreograph their own things. They have to hire choreographers just like K-pop stars do. So, it's exactly the same. Just a different language. I feel like it is kind of racist because, as soon as they see a Western or North American artist like Taylor Swift and Justin Bieber dancing and sing, they go "Oh, they made it all themselves. They're totally original." But when a Korean artist does it, they go "Wow, you didn't do anything yourself, you're a poser." (Interviewee 6: female, 20 yrs, Vietnamese, Toronto).

Such public stereotyping of K-pop might reflect a lack of intercultural understanding in Canadian society, as a White Canadian interviewee, who was introduced to K-pop during his one-year stay in South Korea noted:

I always find people like that [K-pop] if they are more open to different experiences and different kind of things. I find a lot of my Canadian friends, who maybe never gone to another country, look at me weird like, "Oh, why are you listening to that [K-pop], if you can't understand?" (Interviewee 22: male, 24 yrs, Caucasian, Vancouver).

According to a 20-year-old man (Interviewee 26: Filipino, Toronto), who identified himself as a highly dedicated K-pop fan over the past five years, the repudiation of K-pop might be a symptom of a larger tendency of racialization of Asians in North American pop music industries: "They [Asian pop music stars] aren't getting popular [in the West]. It's mostly likely because, I think, right now people aren't really used to that sort of change. There's still a lot of people who... who...who can be racist, let's just say. (...)." It was not only K-pop as a cultural artifact and K-pop idols as media personalities, but also K-pop fans that is looked down on in the public. An 18-year-old woman (Interviewee 05: Vietnamese, Kelowna) noted: "People assume that we're those really hard core fan girls. Even though there's a male population as well. Um, that people fetishize Asians. We're like, kind of the eccentric community. (...) I don't really see anything positive about it." The interviewees, most of whom were people of color and women, tended to associate the dominant representation of K-pop in the West with the racialization of its fans as feminine and passive subjects. Thus, the Western-oriented way of understanding "other" pop music forms was identified as a force restricting transnational flows of K-pop.

Second, Canadian-based K-pop fans questioned Korean-based fans' nationalistic attitudes and activities. Several interviewees critically commented on the aggressive online behaviors of some South Korean-based fans, also known as *sasaeng* fan¹. They criticized *sasaeng* fans for their obsessive adoration of K-pop idols and for their offensive nationalistic pride, which sometimes interrupted global fans' communication with other fans. An administrator of a global K-pop fan group explained how *sasaeng* fans were eventually discharged from the online forum:

It's difficult to regulate online a lot of them because they are in Korea. (...) If the *sasaeng* fan posts something [e.g., irrelevant or extreme comments or pictures] on the internet and we see it,

we can get it removed by our complaints and things like that. So we can monitor what happens on the internet, but whatever happens outside the internet we can't deal with (Interviewee 1: female, 23 yrs, Caucasian, Kelowna)

Thus, most fans in the study distanced themselves from the group of *sasaeng* fans. For the Canadian-based fans in the study, nationalizing forces and exclusive attitudes deployed by some fans—South Korean-based *sasaeng* fans in particular—appeared to be barriers to the transnational dissemination of K-pop. Furthermore, *sasaeng* fans' nationalistic claim for exclusive knowledge about, and ownership of, their national idols was in conflict with the perceived benefits of K-pop as a hybrid cultural form allowing a wide range of fans to participate in the “pro-sumption” of original texts. According to a few interviewees, it is not only *sasaeng* fans but also a wide range of South Korean-based fans that despised international fans. South Korean-based fans appeared to argue for the ownership of K-pop, while distinguishing themselves from non-Korean, “inauthentic” fans:

A lot of Korean fans tend to look down on international fans. There are a lot of us [i.e., international K-pop fans] who take K-Pop as an accessory to be cool just because it's trending. And a lot of Korean fans don't like those people. They tend to look down on us even though we do supply most of the idols with paychecks. (Interviewee 28: female, 18 yrs, Vietnamese, Toronto)

South Korean fans' nationalistic attitudes that the interviewees pointed out may resonate with several recent incidents where K-pop idols had to publicly apologize to their South Korean fans for their behaviors, which may be considered offensive to “national sentiments”(e.g., anti-Japanese sentiment) in South Korea. As one of the latest examples among many others, Tiffany, the second generation Korean American member of the popular K-pop idol group Girls' Generation, was severely criticized by South Korea's public and fans for using Japanese Rising Sun flag emojis on her SNS postings on August 15 (which is Korea's Liberation Day that celebrates the decolonization from Japan in 1945) after her performance in Tokyo (Khater). Such nationalistic fan practices, reportedly evident amongst South Korean-based K-pop fans, seem to be in conflict with global fans' engagement with K-pop as hybrid and participatory content.

Global fans' criticism of Western stereotyping and exclusive nationalism among South Korean-based fans may show how cosmopolitan globalization is imagined and pursued in the global consumption of K-pop. In global fans' imagination, K-pop is not necessarily a fixed entity, which can be conveniently stereotyped by the West and/or owned by South Korean fans. By challenging essentialized imageries of K-pop, the Canadian-based fans wanted to maintain K-pop as a hybrid resource for playful participatory activities in a cosmopolitan world.

Imagination of Cute Globalization

Along with “participatory” and “cosmopolitan” modes of global imagination, the cuteness embodied by K-pop idols may offer fans a way of negotiating the process of globalization. By consuming the particular images of K-pop idol groups, fans might engage in the process of cultural globalization, which would otherwise be experienced as a Western-oriented, homogenizing force, in a relatively personal and intimate way. In particular, global K-pop fans in the study tended to easily identify with K-pop personalities who present cute images. Given the context, this section will address the mode of global imagination facilitated by the fans' consumption of K-pop idols' cuteness—which will be referred to as “cute globalization”.

K-pop idols were often described as approachable and modest figures in contrast to their Western counterparts. The fans' accounts appeared to confirm previous research findings in which K-pop idols are represented as humble and intimate celebrities in the media, especially via softened (and disciplined) images (S. Jung; Kim and Kim; Lie). K-pop male idols' bodies have been represented as a "perfect" combination of modern, Western, *and* Asian traits without the overt sexualisation often observed in American pop music (E-Y. Jung, "Transnational Korea"). Meanwhile, female idols' cuteness, also known as *aegyo*², has been primarily promoted in their performance and presentation (S. Jung). In particular, K-pop girl groups' "mandatory cuteness" tends to be maintained through highly disciplinary training and plastic surgeries (C. Oh 63). Along with K-pop's cute and romantic themes, as seen in lyrics that are devoid of any aspects of sex, violence, and drugs, K-pop idols seem to embody a sense of sincerity and politeness (Kim and Kim). These K-pop attitudes might be appealing to global fans, as it represents a meek mode of globalization, which could be contrasted with Western-oriented globalization.

The fans' imagination of cute globalization via K-pop is a cultural practice that challenges the dominant sexualisation of media celebrities in the Western media. In particular, the "soft" masculinities emphasized in the images of several K-pop boy bands seem to be contrasted with the "hard" masculinities pervasive in Western pop culture (S. Jung). As a 21 year-old woman pointed out, "K-pop is more focused on cute images, whereas in the West there's more of a pressure for guys to be tough" (Interviewee 9: female, 21 yrs, Pakistani, Kelowna). However, according to several fans in the study, despite the overall tendency of the soft, cute imagination of K-pop stars, cuteness may not be equally applied to male and female K-pop stars. While acknowledging "soft" masculinities, a respondent noted that stereotypical cuteness might be imposed more on female K-pop stars.

There is always a school girl concept. Innocent, pure school girl, teenaged, and youthful images. They [K-pop girl bands] never show mature images. I would say I have never seen their mature images. Even for SNSD [i.e., a relatively old girl group], I would argue I have never seen their video that looks mature. (Interviewee 17: female 21 yrs, Chinese, Vancouver).

Another interviewee also compared the cuteness of male and female K-pop groups and demonstrated how they are differently represented in the media. She noted that male idols, unlike their female counterparts, had more variations in their cute images:

Male groups do have more of change. It's like a formula of how they evolve. For guy groups, a lot of them start with sometimes a cute, sometimes a regular boyish concept. And then, maybe a year or two later, they are like, "Oh we're gonna come back with a sexy slash man-like concept. (Interviewee 16: female 20 yrs, Taiwanese, Vancouver)

While the fans were, to some extent, aware of the K-pop industry's commercial drives behind the production of cute images, the fans' imagination of cute globalization seemed to reduce the polysemic attributes of K-pop as hybrid texts to a romanticized entity. In other words, by conveniently consuming the simplified imagery of cute idols and texts of K-pop in "a non-threatening, pleasant package" (Lie 356), some fans might not necessarily appreciate the multiple layers of K-pop as a cultural phenomenon but conform to the cultural industries' drive for "infantile capitalism", whereby consumers are depoliticized and remain at the infantile phase (Galbraith and Karlin 15).

The fans' desire for purifying and essentializing K-pop and its idols as cute cultural forms

was apparent when the interviewees expressed their concern about the sexualization of K-pop idols. The interviewees expressed their disappointment about increasingly sexualized images of K-pop idols. Most interviewees, including male fans, preferred “cutesy” images or performances rather than explicitly sexualized ones.

There’s no cutesy group any more in K-pop. There used to be the groups that would be all cutesy and innocent. They would have that innocent concept. Like, “Hey, look at us we’re super cute and we can do *aegyo*.” But now it seems like all the groups are trying to move toward sexy, intense, or really hard hitting concepts. Like, Hello Venus. They went from having really cute music and doing cutesy dances and not wearing revealing clothing. All of a sudden, shaking their butts in front of the camera, wearing crop tops and booty shorts. (...) I feel like, it’s a shame. It’s a very big shame for K-pop because everyone’s trying to sell sex now. (Interviewee 29: female, 20 yrs, Vietnamese, Toronto)

In this manner, *aegyo* and cuteness, which can be considered infantile femininity subject to the patriarchal ideology (Kim; C. Oh), were reproduced among the fans’ discourses in an essentialized way. Similarly, a male fan (Interviewee 3: male, 20 yrs, Filipino, Toronto) also expressed his disappointment and concern about the sexualization of K-pop idols: “Apink [K-pop idol girl group] is doing a really good job because they’re doing cute. I swear if Apink goes to sexy, I’m probably going to cry as a fan because it’s just...it’s just so different. I don’t want them to do that.” In this manner, for the fans, sexualized bodies appeared to diminish the charm of K-pop and its idols as “happy,” “bubbly,” and “cute” pop music and stars.

The images of cute idols are designed by their entertainment agencies through various marketing platforms, such as on stage performances, reality shows, and variety talk shows (C. Oh). Some fans were aware of the role that agencies played in the production of cuteness in K-pop and criticized the agencies for their commercial interests. For example, an interviewee commented on the K-pop industry’s notorious idol training system where K-pop idols are treated like products:

[What I do not like is] how hard the label companies push their idols. I hear how SM [a major K-pop entertainment agency] starves their idols [to get their bodies slim] and pushes them way above the max. I find that absolutely ridiculous. They’re people too, I mean, even though they’re here to entertain us and all that, they’re people too. They deserve to have a little freedom. (Interviewee 6: female, 20 yrs, Vietnamese, Toronto).

However, despite their relative awareness of the idols’ labor condition, the fans enjoyed consuming the innocent and cute images represented by K-pop idols. In so doing, the complexity behind the ongoing production and dissemination of K-pop idols seemed to be reduced to the binary opposition between innocent idols and the vicious system. This simplified framework might not sufficiently allow the fans to penetrate how the cute globalization of K-pop is articulated with the standardized commodification of human body and emotion (Kim and Kim). The cute and innocent idols are relentlessly subject to emotional labor and discipline forced by the capitalist desire of the K-pop industry (Kim). In addition, while consuming cuteness inscribed in K-pop, the fans might be interpellated into apolitical consumers (Galbraith and Karlin).

Overall, while fans explore the hybrid and participatory side of globalization via K-pop, they are also led to consuming the soft side of K-pop-mediated globalization. K-pop-mediated imagination of globalization, observed amongst the K-pop fans in the study, might differ from

the Western oriented mode of global homogenization of culture. In the fans' narratives, the world projected in K-pop was a relatively communal, intimate, cute, and bubbly space. The mediated cuteness of K-pop idols involves commodifying processes through which idols are harshly trained and patriarchal gender roles are reproduced. This process of imagining cute globalization appears to obfuscate the structural forces and contradictions involved in the production and dissemination of cuteness in K-pop.

Conclusion

This study has explored Canadian-based fans' reception of the non-Western produced, yet highly hybrid, pop music of K-pop. For Canadian-based fans, K-pop may serve as a cultural resource with which they can imagine something absent in the present (Orgad 41). In particular, as a hybrid cultural form, K-pop seemed to be appropriated by its overseas fans as a resource for imagining different and alternative routes of globalization. As this article has metaphorically referred to "participatory," "cosmopolitan," and "cute" globalization, three different yet overlapping modes of globalization were imagined in Canadian fans' consumption of K-pop. The study has found that the hybridity of K-pop is re-appropriated by its fans in playful ways, as shown especially in the fans' engagement with its English mixing, which is not always grammatically correct or thematically relevant. K-pop's room for playful participation was further facilitated by its textual attributes easily allowing for multiple ways of interpretation and close affiliation with social media-driven environments. The participatory aspect of K-pop was further enhanced by the fans' desire for cosmopolitan and inclusive cultural consumption. Moreover, by consuming cute imageries of K-pop and its idols, the fans appeared to imagine a softer side of globalization. The consumption of cuteness, however, might obfuscate the commodifying and disciplinary forces behind innocent images of K-pop idols.

While this study focuses on the three modes of global imagination in cultural consumption of K-pop, there might be other probable imaginations of K-pop among its fans. Despite some common characteristics, there are variations under the umbrella term K-pop. While there are frequent overlaps in the lists of the respondents' favorite K-pop groups, the fans were keenly aware of the evolving nature of K-pop idol music along with a large number of new idols. That is, as agreed by both fans and critics, there are different generations of K-pop idols groups since the late 1990s. Besides, further diversities can be identified even within the same generation of idol groups. For example, South Korean-based pop music critics Cha and Choi (Cha and Choi 150–153) have categorized K-pop girl groups as those who effectively adopt the style of global pop (e.g., Girls' Generation and Wonder Girls), those who reproduce the conventional image of innocent and cute Korean girls (e.g., Girls' Generation and Kara), and those who present the image of independent and strong women (e.g., 2NE1). However, as shown in the case of Girls' Generation, the boundaries between different categories are not strict and can be blurred. In particular, as Cha and Choi noted, the images and strategies of K-pop idols have evolved dynamically in response to media environments and local and global music markets.

In conclusion, K-pop fans' global imagination can be analyzed as a subversive or regressive cultural practice. K-pop fans' desire for participatory, cosmopolitan, and cute globalization might be nothing more than imaginary escape from their routine daily lives through consumption. However, pop cultural forms could provide audiences – especially young fans – with a resource to symbolically negotiate their social and material problems (Cohen). Popular cultural texts can provide young people who struggle with a lack of resources and authority with

a cultural means through which dominant social orders are negotiated. Given that transnational media affects the work of the imagination as “the socially situated deployment of cultural fantasies” (Illouz 378), the influx and consumption of K-pop among Canadian-based youth may offer insights into how the force of globalization is interpreted and negotiated in audiences’ everyday lives. While K-pop might be marginalized as an inauthentic, hybrid form in the Canadian context, fans engage with K-pop as a way of imagining an alternative, if not subversive, route of cultural globalization.

ENDNOTE

¹ The newly coined Korean term, *sasaeng* fan, refers to Korean K-pop fans who are intensively and “unhealthily” interested in the private lives of K-pop stars (Williams and Ho).

² *Aegyo* literally means cute behaviors and attitudes. *Aegyo*, which tends to be expressed by Korean female idols, features “short, child-like utterances emphasizing immaturity and vulnerability” (Brown 5), which are often accompanied by particular childish gestures and facial expressions.

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