

Contributions of Social Media and Digital Globalization to K-pop Transmission

Ruoning Li

Veritas Collegiate Academy, Beijing, China

rene139000@gmail.com

Abstract. As globalization proceeds, one of its branches, digital globalization creates markets and user communities on a global scale, providing a platform for information transmission with a huge base of potential customers and effective ways to reach them. Pop culture is one of its products. Becoming a part of everyone's lives, pop cultures start to adapt and evolve because of the constant development of digital media. Eventually, Korean Pop Music (K-pop) was one of the genres that emerged and became known throughout the world. This research sought to determine how social media---largely Twitter, YouTube, and Weibo---influenced K-pop transmission. The study discusses the influences of social media on K-pop from three main aspects: immediate transculturation, fandom participatory practices, and interactivity between artists and fandom. The researcher distributed online survey questionnaires and a follow-up interview with participants ages ranging from 11-40 years old. Then, using a thematic data analysis approach, the data collected were analyzed. This study serves two purposes: K-pop's varying popularity and access across geographical regions present an intriguing area for comparative analysis of social media networks with diverse users worldwide. Second, having a comprehensive comprehension of social media's significance and the mechanism of globalization is highly beneficial in terms of preserving disappearing cultural traditions and customs, such as China's intangible cultural heritage and its associated cultural transmission.

Keywords: Digital Globalization; Digitalization; Korean Wave; Pop Culture; Mass Media; South Korea; Social Media.

1. Introduction

Digital globalization has enabled pop culture to spread around the world through a variety of entertainment and consumer products including movies, music, TV shows, and fashion. Consumer products have made possible the expanding exchange of information, transfer of goods, and personal contact on a global scale. Indeed, it is often argued that without these technologies, the current globalization would not be possible. However, rather than reflecting the globalization of technology, communication represents the technologies of globalization as they serve the increasingly globalized functioning of cultural, social, and economic life (Archibugi and Michie 123). The continuous changes in communication technology in the digital age have extended the reach of communication media to all areas of social life, the network is simultaneously global and local, universal and customized, and the model is constantly changing (Castells 6). In the past few decades, Korea has become a new cultural powerhouse and one of the leading exporters of entertainment products to the international market. Around the 1990s, the popularity of Korean dramas and movies skyrocketed and were described as the "Korean Wave" or "*Hallyu*" (a Chinese term that literally means "Korean Wave"). K-pop's popularity and its participatory fan culture have expanded beyond Korea and become significant all around the globe in the past years, which is facilitated by the fast-speed transmission of social media. Many online media platforms such as Weibo, Twitter, and YouTube have become popular channels for global distribution as today's digital media content is often combined with pop culture and audiovisual elements.

This study has chosen K-pop as a topic of research for the following reasons: The fact that its popularity and access vary across geographical regions represents an interesting research topic. It allows for a comparative analysis of social media networks centered on the same topic but with

diverse users worldwide. A notable example is China, where anti-Hallyu sentiments have never disappeared due to the outburst of the diplomatic dispute against the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system deployment on the Korean peninsula in 2016 (Lim and Ferguson). Because China is irritated about such action, the Chinese government played a significant role in eliciting the tumult with a roundup of retaliatory actions. The state administration gave the unwritten rule of press and publication, radio, film, and television of the evisceration of all scenes with Korean celebrities in TV programs and TV advertising (F. W-T. Yang). But despite this, the popularity of K-pop has never diminished in China, showing the strength of social media and the power of information diffusion.

Social media not only makes the dissemination of information faster and more effective, but also enhances fan activity and the online behavior of fans. To the industry and the media, fans have become increasingly essential as the most effectively engaged and loyal consumers who might produce abundant benefits by serving as material and immaterial laborers (Yin). The leading K-pop entertainment companies reveal such traits to fans. Their presence has also led to a lot of fan behavior triggered by digital globalization.

This paper examines ways social media enhances K-pop flow all around the globe and empowers online fandom. I begin by investigating how it encourages immediate transculturation, allows fans to perform participatory practices, and enables interactivity between fans and idols.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Advancement in Digital Technologies

With the advancement of the Internet, people today are constantly experiencing elements of other cultures and communicating with each other through digital technology. In today's society, young people are the group that is most rapidly integrating digital media into their daily lives. Castell (2) characterized the Internet social networks as “spaces of autonomy”. By sharing grief and hope in the free public space of the Internet, and by connecting with each other, individuals form networks, regardless of their personal views or organizational attachments. People’s solidarity helped them overcome their fears, a paralyzing emotion on which they rely for their strength to thrive and multiply (3), and which is the main reason why the Internet is so powerful and spreading so quickly. According to a study from the Pew Research Center (Vogels, Gelles-Watnick, and Massarat), “the vast majority of teens have access to digital devices, such as smartphones (95%), desktop or laptop computers (90%), and gaming consoles (80%). And the study shows there has been an uptick in daily teen internet users, from 92% in 2014-15 to 97% today. In addition, the share of teens who say they are online almost constantly has roughly doubled since 2014-15 (46% now and 24% then)”. As the global social environment for youth culture (Kim 3) has changed, youth culture itself has also altered.

2.2. The Rise of K-pop

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Korean pop music was undergoing a transformation that surged in response to social, political, economic, and cultural changes in Korea (Lee and Nornes). Most observers believe that the Korean Wave began in China with *What Is Love All About*, a drama that aired on China's Central Television (CCTV) in 1997 and created a sensation. Since then, more K-dramas have become popular with viewers in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Vietnam (Chua and Iwabuchi 26). During the 2000s, several Korean entertainment companies tried to market their singers to a global market (Kim 5), which first introduced such pop culture to the world. K-pop's current popularity is inextricably linked to the initial credit of these entertainment companies. The strategies of the producers of these entertainment companies and the managers of idol groups to create compelling material are mostly focused on the following: the diversity of the audiovisual content, the meaningfulness of the concepts behind the albums (more and more K-pop songs nowadays reflect social issues and popular topics), the systematic training of the artists’ skills, the management of the

artists' faces and bodies, the synchronization and specificity of the dance forms, and the rapid dissemination through the Internet.

2.3. Social Media as a Multifunctional Communication Medium

Social media, primarily YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Weibo, serve multiple functions in terms of K-pop transmission. Castell (6) describes the function of communication medium as:

The ongoing transformation of communication technology in the digital age extends the reach of communication media to all domains of social life in a network that is at the same time global and local, generic and customized in an ever-changing pattern. The process of constructing meaning is characterized by a great deal of diversity. There is, however, one feature common to all processes of symbolic construction: they are largely dependent on the messages and frames created, formatted, and diffused in multimedia communication networks.

When specifically analyzing K-pop diffusion, social media, first of all, is a marketing website for entertainment companies. Considering the existing Internet environment and their business model (Flores et al. 32), K-pop entertainment companies use these social media platforms to sell merchandise and earn profits from paid advertisements. Second, social media serves as a medium to expand the group's popularity. To promote their new music videos, basically, all idol groups have opened official YouTube channels and other public social media pages to interact with international audiences. In addition to that, when we connect with the aforementioned role, the idol groups launched under these companies will gradually increase their popularity and earn higher advertising fees, thus reaching a positive loop. Third, social media particularly aim to regulate and provide a space for fandom activities (Yin), as they redefine the 'individual's behavior and decision-making, modes of socializing and participation, perception and thinking, [. . .] thus determining how culture is created' (Strehovec 146). In this case, fandom culture is created, and so does fan activities.

3. Methodology

To prove my hypothesis stated in the thesis statement that social media enhances K-pop flow all around the globe and empowers online fandom. I begin by investigating how it encourages immediate transculturation, allows fans to perform participatory practices, and enables interactivity between fans and idols, so an online survey and interviews are conducted. The survey was intended to show that the use of online media does contribute to the diffusion of K-pop and encourages fans' participatory practices. The two follow-up interviews present a further and more detailed investigation of the research questions, with more precise information from the detailed verbal responses of the interviewees.

3.1. Operational Definition

The operational definition for "diffusion of K-pop" is identified as whether the participants obtained K-pop-related information from social media, through which application, and under which circumstances they would use social media as a platform to receive information, including the process of transculturation. In addition, as Henry Jenkins explained in *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, participatory cultures are "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of information mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices" (7), the operational definition for "encourages fans' participatory practices" is defined as how frequently, through which platform, and in which geographical area, fans participate online and offline activities.

3.2. Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected from March to April 2023 with Chinese and English as the languages for survey questions. The participants self-identified as K-pop fans or people who had previously

engaged in fandom activity. Besides, the survey included a specific question that non-K-pop fans were also expected to answer, which was “*What do you think is the role of social media in the process of fans following the stars?*”. The survey included 36 questions in total, composed of 2 response questions and 34 multiple choice questions, which required participants 5-15 minutes to complete. All subjects took the online survey via *Wenjuanxing* to assess eligibility and gather information about their identities and engagement in K-pop to personalize a few interview questions. Participants were recruited via a QR code I composed that was transmitted through WeChat, Weibo, Instagram, the school newsletter, and Twitter. Two weeks after the questionnaire was sent out, I listed some interview questions through the responses of those who submitted the questionnaire and conducted a customized interview with two K-pop female fans. The later-constructed interview environment allows spontaneous responses; the follow-up questions and dialogue encourage the interview to reflect meaningful expression for each participant. All interviews were recorded using the application “*Voice Memo*” in the iOS system, which is a secure audio recording device. Interviews lasted between 15-25 minutes and were conducted in April 2023.

Then, a qualitative analysis of the survey and interview was conducted to answer the research question. Due to the nature of the data obtained through the survey and interviews, which cannot be quantified, a thematic data analysis approach was employed in order to gain a more profound comprehension of the underlying reasons behind the transmission phenomenon. The qualitative data analysis method utilized was extensive and multifaceted, characterized by subjectivity, descriptiveness, and exploratory nature. A more specific and detailed result of the survey and interview is presented in the following chapter.

4. Result

In total, 61 responses were collected. All subjects' ages range from 11 to 40 years old, with 8.2% males and 88.52% females (3.28% do not wish to respond). Of the 61 participants, 55 were self-identified K-pop fans and 6 were not. For those who were not, they would only answer the aforementioned “specific question”. The data strongly proved my initial hypothesis since 81.82% of the subjects indicated that they first saw and got to know K-pop groups via social media, with 94.96% suggesting that they participated in fandom activities/cultures online instead of offline. Further evidence of the wide application and the role of transmission that social media play are presented as an interviewee stated

“That’s how I know StayC since I saw their music video via Bilibili, and I like this song very much. [So] I went to search them online and become a fan of them.”

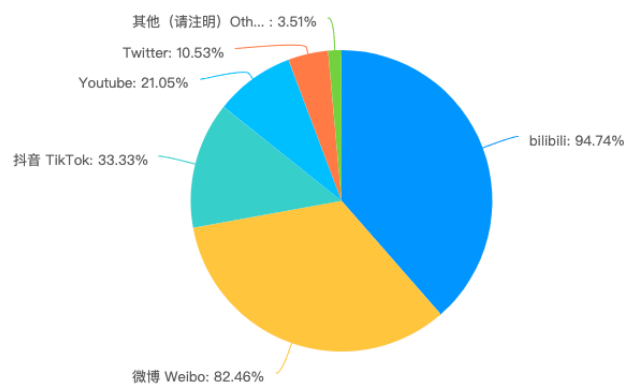


Figure 1. Channels people usually view the Translated text (e.g. album configuration-related or magazine interview related)

Since most of the participants in this survey are non-native Korean speakers, 96.36% of them said they encountered language barriers in K-pop fandom, especially when they are browsing their biased group/artists' official social media accounts, buying albums/peripherals online, watching the

interview and live streaming of their idols, communicating with fans who speak Korean (e.g. trading, communicating, discussing with them). In this case, 90.91% of them solve the language barrier problems via translation through the artist's microblogging site, with only 38.18% translating themselves.

The main media/applications where fans view the translated content are Bilibili, Weibo, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter. This data shows that for foreign fans, social media helps them to participate in fandom activities easier, offering them a sense of involvement.

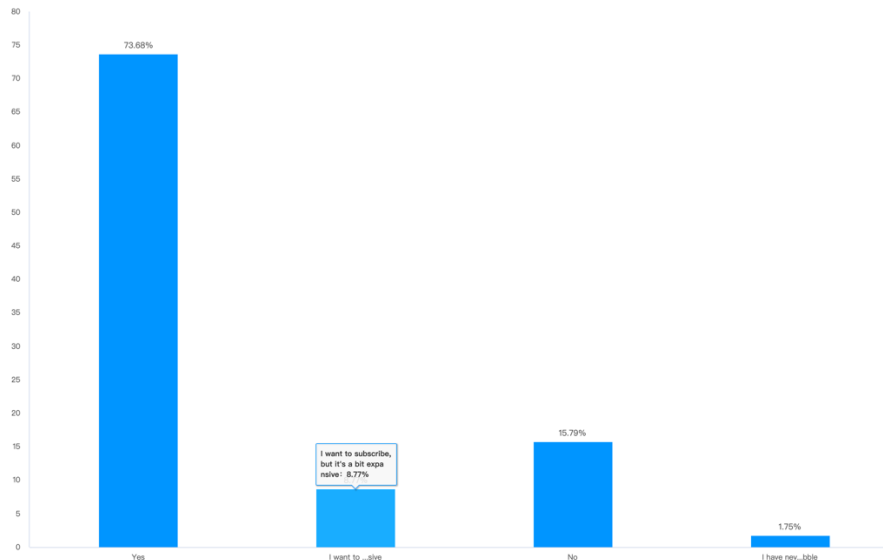


Figure 2. Did you subscribe to your idol's Lysn or Bubble?

Among the K-pop fans of the survey, 73.68% (42 people) claimed that they have subscribed to their idol's Bubble, showing that Bubble is not only a sign of fandom participatory culture but also a way they strengthen the interactivity between fans and idols.

5. Discussion

5.1. Immediate Transculturation

With the increasing popularity of K-pop in China, the number of native Chinese fans is also growing. In China, one of the main driving forces behind Korean pop music fans is undoubtedly the developing digital technology. If it were not for new media technology, today's K-pop fans would not exist. At the same time, this also laid a potential challenge for foreign fans, for Chinese fans face language barriers. The vast majority of fans say they will understand foreign languages (Korean most of the time) through social media translation accounts because most fans are not willing to spend extra time and energy learning a new language to understand their idols' lives or tweets.

In the Chinese K-pop fandom community, fans mainly watch or read translated content through Weibo and Bilibili. Specifically, there will be a dedicated "Fan Account" on Weibo, established by fans and not regulated by the entertainment company to translate Korean content. Generally, album configurations, official notifications, merch sales, interviews, and other content will be translated. Video or live broadcast-type content is usually presented on Bilibili. According to the questionnaire survey, the vast majority (77%) of fans stated that the translated content is accurate. It is precisely because of this that more and more Chinese people, those who originally did not know about K-pop, are beginning to understand this popular culture. The Chinese fan group's form of transculturation can also be applied to other countries. Social media indeed provides great convenience for foreign language-non-Korean-speaking fans. Translation accounts, which in other words, transculturation that social media provide, allow K-pop content to reach mainstream markets in different countries directly, crossing cultural borders, and being distributed by local fans in multidirectional ways (Kim

8). The result of this cultural differentiation has ultimately shattered the unidirectional flow of the global cultural industry previously dominated by Western culture.

5.2. Fandom Participatory Practices

Apart from the daily schedules of the idols themselves, which are often packed with various events, fan communities also frequently organize fandom participatory practices and activities. Participatory culture is a culture in which consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content (Burgess and Green). The widespread adoption of fandom participatory culture can be attributed to the rise of novel media and technology, such as Twitter and YouTube, that have eliminated the technological hindrances that once restricted consumers from producing and sharing content online.

K-pop fans share their cover songs and dance performances of idol groups on the internet, which are examples of participatory practices. Apart from the sharers, netizens can also watch videos and audio of the fans through social media, which expands the spread of K-pop. The internet has also brought the participatory culture of these "folk groups" into the real world. More and more Chinese university students have established popular dance and music after-school clubs, and activities like "random dance challenges" are frequently held on campus. The participation method of the "random dance challenge" is simple. Generally, the organizer will randomly play K-pop songs, and participating fans or dancers will dance to the corresponding music. This activity can be found on many campuses and even in shopping malls. The organizer will release relevant notices a few days in advance on Chinese social media accounts, such as Weibo and TikTok, to recruit fans to participate in the activity.

Overall, the active involvement of individuals in fan communities constitutes a manifestation of affiliation. It serves as a means of uniting individuals who share common interests in virtual communities, where they can engage in various forms of interaction, content creation, and knowledge sharing.

5.3. Interactivity between Fans and Idols

Social media not only contribute to the "intra-transmission" of K-pop but also "inter-transmission". "Inter-transmission" is characterized as cultural exchange with the outside world often involving novel or unfamiliar concepts for people. However, "intra-transmission" emphasizes the internal dissemination within an existing culture. In the spread of K-pop, the interaction between artists and fans can be seen as a form of "intra-transmission". This concept is reflected through the use of platforms such as "Bubble/Lysn" and "Twitter Fan-Meeting Activity".

Many Hallyu fans' activities include exchanging and sharing K-pop information and news with other fans. They will feel a strong connection with their biased idols or artists, related websites, and other users. Lysn (Korean: 리슨) was a Korean mobile application created by the South Korean company Dear U exclusively for SM Entertainment (Kim). The application is dedicated to communication between artists and fans, and joining fan clubs through subscriptions. The company first launched in 2018 and launched "Bubbles" in February 2020 and has expanded the service through the participation of other entertainment companies, such as JYP and Hybe (Song). Bubble is a platform where fans can "chat" with artists like on a messenger app. Fans pay a charge to access their favorite stars' Bubble content, however, with a separate charge for each artist's content they subscribe to. Of course, it is not an AI that responds to the messages sent by fans, but the idols themselves. This will make fans feel that their beloved idol is more approachable and no longer an unattainable star. Especially for idols of the opposite sex, this will give fans beautiful fantasies. Although in the "Bubble" interface of the artist, all messages sent by fans who subscribe to his/her bubble can be seen. If the idol chooses to respond to a greeting or question in a certain message, the fan who sent this message or the fans who sent messages with similar meaning will feel lucky. In this way, the use of Bubble greatly enhances and consolidates the subtle and invisible bond between idol fans. This is a manifestation of "intra-transmission".

Another manifestation is "Twitter Fan-Meeting Activity". In such activity, idols will directly reply to fandom messages on Twitter, covering with the outward appearance of "gifting fans" to further enhance fan participation in activities. For example, in 2021, Stray Kids "STAY Mention Party" is one of the STAYweek Timetable schedules to celebrate their beloved STAY Official 3rd Anniversary. This social media event gives STAYs a chance to interact with one (or more) of Stray Kids' members via Twitter. During the course of the event, the members who are part of the Stray Kids take turns monitoring the official Twitter account, @Stray_Kids. They diligently peruse the posts and tweets submitted by the STAY community and respond to those that capture their attention or pique their interest (Park).



Figure 3. Tweet sent by Stray Kids official Twitter account about the “@STAY Mention Party”

As is customary, their warm hearts and sense of humor never fail to inspire and entertain their fans, which are STAYs. Via such activity, Stray Kids have elevated the intimate relationship STAYs to a whole new level.

6. Conclusion

In the contemporary era of globalization, the dissemination of new information, diverse customs, and ways of living is occurring more frequently and readily across different cultures. Social media has played a pivotal role in this trend, especially since the mid-2000s, by facilitating the dissemination of various Asian popular cultures. K-pop is a prominent example of the products of this growth, as it is now freely accessible as it flows across different national borders. The advent of social networking has brought individuals worldwide closer together emotionally, despite their physical distance. This phenomenon has been particularly pronounced in the relationship between artists and their audiences.

K-pop has become a global phenomenon by capitalizing on universal needs and values in the socially-networked world. The expansion of K-pop popularity has enlarged its fandom so that fans are now formed internationally. In this case, social media made intermediate transculturation possible, helping foreign fans to overcome language barriers. The translated contents allow people to communicate happiness, youthfulness, and energy, which has not only broadened its appeal but also fostered a sense of intimacy and emotional connection with audiences across cultural boundaries. Moreover, K-pop's culture encourages consumer participation and involvement, which resonates with the new digital generation's desire for active roles as participants rather than passive consumers. Consequently, the circulation of K-pop's user-generated content, such as covered dances, covered songs, or “random dance challenges” by enthusiastic fans, has propelled K-pop's global exposure across the world. Lastly, K-pop artists' active engagement on social media has allowed a more personal and intimate

relationship to be built between artists and international fans, resulting in loyal and engaged fan communities. Therefore, the recent rise of K-pop in the world can be attributed to digital globalization that leverages K-pop's strengths, enabling such pop culture to transmit at a faster-than-ever speed.

Although this thesis solely analyzes K-pop, a popular culture, in today's society, many cultures have also benefited from the positive impact of digital globalization. If deeper research and learning can identify the controlling factors of technological globalization and the way behind them, it will possibly drive people to realize and recognize more cultures. All cultures, whether they are popular culture, religious culture, or traditional culture, have benefited from thousands of years of development and evolution. However, in this process, it is inevitable that cultures will face gradual loss, destruction, and even disappearance. In this case, understanding the role of social media and how globalization works is extremely helpful for disappearing folklore and customs, such as China's intangible cultural heritage and related cultural dissemination. Therefore, the rise of K-pop is intricately linked to digitalization, and the transmission and diffusion of culture should be emphasized as a key concept of digital globalization.

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Appendix

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