

Between universes: Fan positionalities in the transnational circulation of K-pop

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Abstract

Transnational fans of South Korean pop music (K-pop) are known for their cosmopolitan sense of belonging and community beyond geocultural boundaries. Academics who are also fans (i.e. aca-fans) and who have conducted recent ethnographic studies have developed a favorable perspective on the potential of global K-pop fandom. While acknowledging the alternative force generated by the grassroots K-pop universe, this article suggests that transnational fans do not constitute a homogeneous group; rather, they inevitably have to negotiate their own positionalities, such as race and gender, when engaging with K-pop's virtual fan universe. Drawing on qualitative interviews with K-pop fans in Canada, this study comparatively analyzes how young people of White and Asian backgrounds experience K-pop as an emerging cultural genre whose meaning is not yet clearly situated in their local contexts. The study suggests that transnational fans' experiences reveal the gap between the socially divided *real* universe and the cosmopolitan *virtual* K-pop universe.

Keywords

Audience positionality, K-pop fan, K-pop universe, race, the Korean Wave, transnational audience

Introduction

The recent global circulation of South Korean pop music (K-pop), drama, film, webtoon, cosmetic goods, and foods, which are often referred to as the Korean Wave (or Hallyu), is evolving quickly beyond the traditional routes of international media importation and exportation. Among other genres, K-pop, which is often recognized by its signature choreography and music videos of idol groups composed of four or more young men or women, is now recognized extensively as a cultural phenomenon among young people. The global followers of K-pop groups, such as BTS and Blackpink, actively engage

with their favorite idols and other international fans through social media. Despite the physical distance from their idols, K-pop fans appeared to be highly dedicated to their favorite stars, even compared to those of any other established global artists (Kim, 2022). In light of the expanding global fan-bases of K-pop, this article examines how fans' ethno-racial positions may affect their experiences and

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understanding of this relatively new, non-Western cultural genre. In particular, this study comparatively explores how White fans and fans of Asian backgrounds engage with the non-Western cultural form of K-pop in a Western context. Given that the role of ethno-racial factors in the circulation of K-pop has been relatively under-researched, the present study contributes to facilitating critical discourses about race and ethnicity in transnational media studies of the Korean Wave.

Recent studies have defined global K-pop fans by their collaborative and participatory nature, moving beyond cultural backgrounds of members (Hong, 2020; Jin, 2021; McLaren & Jin, 2020). For example, Jin's (2021) study of the BTS fandom (ARMY) suggested that the fans identify themselves as "citizens of an imagined transnational fandom sphere" while they collaboratively strive to support and protect their idols, BTS (p. 34). McLaren and Jin (2020) also emphasized the affective connections and sense of belonging between BTS fans of different backgrounds. These authors claimed that the overseas fans' subject positions, including nationality, ethnicity, age, and gender, did not necessarily make a significant difference when it came to their enjoyment of K-pop and affective identification with BTS. Similarly, observations of the alliances and solidarity between K-pop fans of diverse backgrounds were presented in a few recent monographs written by Korea-based academics who are also fans (i.e. "aca-fans") (e.g. Hong, 2020; J. Lee, 2019). According to these studies, K-pop fans develop a sense of community and "universe," moving beyond their positionalities.

These findings about K-pop fans' solidarity may not be surprising given that researchers of fandom have often observed a strong sense of belonging and affective affinities between fans (Annett, 2014; Chin & Morimoto, 2013; Min et al., 2019). However, fans may have to negotiate the meanings of K-pop as an emerging cultural genre in relation to their own positionalities, such as race and ethnicity. For example, in the North American context, where K-pop has been stigmatized as inferior cultural content from a non-Western periphery (Jung, 2013), consuming K-pop may not be free of racialization (J. J. Lee et al., 2020) and may have different meanings for

different audience members (Jin et al., 2021). This article explores how Western fans' experiences of K-pop may be diverse or even divided in terms of their ethno-racial backgrounds. Drawing on qualitative interviews conducted in three Canadian cities—Toronto, Vancouver, and Kelowna—between 2015 and 2021, this study comparatively analyzes young people's transcultural experiences with K-pop in Canada with reference to their negotiation of ethno-racial positionalities. While K-pop fan bases have emerged in various Western contexts, and nearly across the globe, this research focuses on the context of Canada—a Western country that has been known for "the contradictory coexistence of the multiethnic population and White-dominant media environments" (K. Yoon, 2019, p. 180). This case study conducted in Canada offers empirical insights for comparatively understanding K-pop fans and their positionalities across Western contexts (e.g. Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021; J. J. Lee et al., 2020; Min et al., 2019).

Contextualizing the research

The data analyzed in this article are drawn from select interview data from a larger project on the Korean Wave in Canada, which has progressed since 2015. The data included various questions about K-pop consumption, and this article focuses on the participants' accounts regarding their ethno-racial positions and relationships with other fans. This article examines how ethno-racial subject positions may play a role in overseas fans' engagement with and meaning-making of K-pop. The interview participants, presented under pseudonyms in this article, were youth residing in Canada who consider themselves fans of K-pop. The data analyzed in this article include qualitative interviews with 32 young Canadians (aged between 16 and 30 years) from diverse backgrounds (24 Asian, including 6 Korean, and 8 White).¹ The researcher obtained informed consent for the participants who volunteered in response to Facebook/Twitter advertisements or recommendations by their friends (i.e. snowballing recruitment). The researcher also acquired parental consent to interview five minor participants. The interviewees primarily identified as female, except

for six male-identified participants. The participants were informed of the interview guidelines and research questions prior to the interviews and were given 2 weeks to opt into the research. While most interviews were conducted in public spaces such as coffee shops before the COVID-19 pandemic, six additional interviews during the pandemic were conducted via Zoom. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to analyze the recurring themes in the participants' accounts.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To enhance the validity of the research findings, forms of communicative validation were sought. In particular, the researcher revisited several interviewees for a conversation about the correct interpretation (Kvale, 2007). Moreover, the research assistants, who were knowledgeable about several K-pop groups and their fandom, offered helpful information during the communicative validation process.²

The research questions initially focused on the process of the interviewees' initiation as K-pop fans and their feelings about other K-pop fans of diverse backgrounds and non-fans. In semi-structured interviews, the participants were asked about how their cultural backgrounds may affect their sense of being a K-pop fan and their interaction with other K-pop fans. The interview data were openly coded first and selectively/comparatively coded to identify key themes. As the analysis progressed, ethno-racial issues seemed salient, compared to other aspects. Several interviewees did not explicitly bring up the topics of ethno-racial aspects in K-pop fan communities. However, whether or not they explicitly used such terms as ethnicity, race, and racism, most interviewees revealed the role of ethno-racial factors in their interactions with other fans in K-pop communities.

Given the sampling method—that is, social media advertising and snowballing—as well as the small sample size, the article does not intend to provide a general overview of Canadian K-pop audiences. Instead, the analysis involves critical thinking about transnational audiences by exploring several probable fan positions. The findings are suggestive of a better understanding of K-pop fans in multi-ethnic contexts while not directly transferrable to the K-fan population at large (Kvale, 2007).

Theorizing transnational media fans

Scholarly discourses around the Korean Wave have addressed various stakeholders in cultural production and consumption. Among others (e.g. producers, policymakers, and marketers), fans and audiences have increasingly been examined in response to questions of why the Korean Wave emerged (T.-J. Yoon & Kang, 2017). Studies of the global fans of the Korean Wave encounter a dilemma between the fans' lived experiences (micro-level analysis) and the theorization of fan practices in relation to external sociocultural factors that influence their consumption (macro- or mezzo-level analysis).

This dilemma is not unique to the studies of K-pop fandom but has been lingering in fan studies for decades. In an essay reflecting on the recent history of fan studies, Jensen (2014) identifies two distinct approaches that are pervasive in the existing studies of fans—the *expressive* approach, which focuses on closely describing fan practices and performance, and the *instrumental* approach, which analyzes fandom as a tool related to larger social, cultural, and political processes. An increasing number of aca-fans' ethnographic studies may fall into the expressive approach category, which often explores the meaning of being fans from an insider's perspective. In comparison, the instrumental approach focuses on the functions of fandom in larger social contexts (Jensen, 2014). While acknowledging that studies of fans may fall into one of the two approaches, Jensen (2014) proposes dialectical interactions between both in order to overcome the dichotomy between fans' lived experiences and macro-level theorization.

An increasing number of researchers examining studies of the Korean Wave (especially K-pop) have been deeply interested in describing fans' lived experiences, which might be closer to the expressive approach. These studies, including those conducted by aca-fans (e.g. Hong, 2020; J. Lee, 2019), tend to celebrate the seemingly empowering grassroots process of young fans' growing together with K-pop idols and other global fans. However, in doing so, said studies have insufficiently analyzed the social implications of K-pop fans' positionalities and activities. To advance the question of positionalities in the

transnational consumption of K-pop, it would be helpful to review several existing studies that have proposed frameworks to examine the complexity and power relations involved in transnational media audiences' experiences (e.g. Athique, 2016; Jenkins, 2004; Jenkins et al., 2013).

Researchers of media studies have considered the importance of audience positionality in transnational media reception. In particular, Jenkins (2004) identified (a) cosmopolitan audiences (whom he called "pop cosmopolitans") and (b) diasporic audiences, both of whom are compared with other audiences who consume only easily accessible mainstream media content. Drawing on the example of the Western appropriation of Indian media content, Jenkins (2004) paid attention to the role of grassroots intermediaries, especially two groups of media fans in the West: (a) the (non-diasporic) "pop cosmopolitan" audiences, who seek to escape the constraints of its local culture, and (b) the diasporic Indian audiences. According to his observation, pop cosmopolitans and diasporic audiences consume transnational media "at cross-purposes," given that the cosmopolitans aim to escape the constraints of their local culture by exploring the coolness associated with the unfamiliar cultural content, whereas the diasporic audiences engage with transnational media from their ancestral homeland or country of origin as a way of negotiating their ethnic identities (Jenkins, 2004, p. 127). Jenkins' (2004) transnational audience model was further articulated in a later study (Jenkins et al., 2013). In this 2013 study, Jenkins and his colleagues emphasized the "alliance" between cosmopolitans attracted to unfamiliar and alien cultural content and diasporic audiences who contribute to "proselyting" others who otherwise remain local. Jenkins (2004) and Jenkins et al. (2013) effectively explored how grassroots media flows among global youth are facilitated in the age of digital platforms. They aptly captured the probable alliance or collaboration between pop cosmopolitans and diasporic youth.

However, Jenkins (2004) and Jenkins et al. (2013) appear to underestimate the role of fans' positionalities, which may result in significantly different media experiences and reproduce the existing power relations, such as ethno-racial hierarchies. Thus, it

can be argued that alliances between different audience groups in facilitating transnational media flows may not always be achievable. Moreover, the categories of pop cosmopolitans and diasporic audiences proposed by Jenkins et al. (2013) remain abstract rather than fully articulated, given that the definition of pop cosmopolitans is unclear in terms of audience positionality. Pop cosmopolitans are defined primarily by their "global consciousness and cultural competency" (Jenkins, 2004, p. 117) and the "active search for cultural difference" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 273). Thus, the pop cosmopolitan seems to be a highly expansive category in which a wide range of audiences can be included, provided they seek global consciousness and cultural difference.

Rather than referring to a large group of overseas audiences who consume the Korean Wave as pop cosmopolitans, it is important to identify further who specifically constitutes the cosmopolitan group. For example, there may be cosmopolitan-oriented audiences who categorically belong to the mainstream audience (e.g. White mainstream audiences in the Western context) or who may be identified as the minority audience (e.g. people of color, indigenous, and sexual minorities). It may be ambiguous or even misleading to define pop cosmopolitans as early adopters and explorers in transnational media flows because this definition may obscure the existing power relations behind the seemingly cosmopolitan audience experiences. In particular, White people and people of color may largely differ in regard to their audience positionalities. Indeed, along with other subject positions (such as gender and social class), it is important to explore how Whiteness as the dominant audience position is negotiated vis-à-vis the consumption of cultural forms that originated in non-Western contexts and have been racialized (Min, 2021; Oh, 2017). Choi and Maliangkay (2015) argued that K-pop can facilitate "minority solidarity" for cultural subaltern audiences overseas by offering "a roundabout way of defying or at least distancing the Euro-American cultural products," whereas the mainstream audience's excitement about K-pop as a cultural text of "the former cultural subalterns" can be considered "soft racism" (p. 14). Similarly, a few other studies have asserted that mainstream audiences' enjoyment of K-pop is not

free of the Orientalist view of non-Western culture (Hong, 2013; Min, 2021; Oh, 2017; K. Yoon, 2019).

In this regard, this article focuses on (a) White fans and (b) fans of diasporic Asian backgrounds, among many other groups of probable K-pop audiences in the Canadian context. White Canadian fans can reveal how their dominant audience position may have to be negotiated in consuming the new content from a non-Western context. In comparison, Asian Canadian fans can show how the audience of ethnic minority positions may negotiate the already racialized cultural genre of K-pop.

Fan positionalities

Most fans in the present study have developed certain strategies to engage with K-pop and negotiate its somewhat enigmatic symbolic values. Their ethno-racial positions seem to have different impacts on their interpretations of this new cultural content. While young people have gradually been exposed to K-pop as a probable option in their soundscape, especially owing to the global recognition of superstar idols (e.g. BTS and Blackpink) since the late 2010s, being openly enthusiastic about it still seems to require certain processes of negotiation. Indeed, the relatively early adopters interviewed for this project in 2015 showed how the grassroots meanings of K-pop emerged in Canada. When a new cultural text from a different geocultural context is introduced, audiences have to explore what it is and how it should be consumed. This process of signification and negotiation, which requires recontextualizing a cultural text, is especially important in the reception of K-pop and the Korean Wave. This wave originated in South Korea, which is a geocultural context that, until recently, was not widely known to residents in Canada as a birthplace of transnational cultural productions.³ A young person's taste for K-pop idols instead of Western pop stars may distinguish this individual from other mainstream audiences. For example, in 2017, several interviewees noted that, being a BTS fan was still considered somewhat "unusual" or "weird" among their peers compared to being a Drake fan. However, K-pop fans' engagement with a relatively marginal music preference is further complicated as they occupy diverse audience

positions. For example, White fans who are in the relatively dominant audience position may find themselves in ironic contexts in which their subject positions might be different from those of the racialized youth fans of K-pop.

White experiences

Pop culture fans are often distinguished from "the culture of more 'normal' popular audiences" (Fiske, 1992, p. 30). Early cultural studies of fandom (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Jensen, 1992) paid attention to relatively marginalized groups of people as the cores of fan communities and the subversive ideological functions of fan practices. However, this "normative definition" of fandom has been criticized for its ignorance of the increasingly diverse fan demographics, including many White, middle-class men (Sandvoss, 2005). This criticism may be applicable to studies of K-pop and the Korean Wave. That is, whereas recent studies of the Korean Wave have revealed that committed fans tend to have relatively marginal sociocultural backgrounds (e.g. working-class or immigrant backgrounds) (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015; Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021; Min, 2021), their comparatively privileged counterparts, such as White, middle-class audiences, should not be ignored in the study of global K-pop audiences. White youth's engagement with K-pop offers an interesting comparison with that of racialized youth. In particular, White youth seem to employ certain strategies for negotiating their identities in consuming K-pop, which is still considered a primarily non-Western, racialized cultural form in the Canadian media landscape.

According to several White fans in this study, their initiation as K-pop fans and introduction to the imagined K-pop universe involved efforts to get along with other K-pop fans, many of whom are not necessarily White. The White interviewees in the study were mostly aware of the probable negative perception of White people's cultural appropriation of non-Western cultural forms. They were worried about being perceived as "obsessive" young fans, who are known as "Koreaboos" among K-pop fans and other youth. "Koreaboo" is a derogatory slang term that refers to those who excessively identify

with Korean culture and overtly express their dedication to nearly all aspects of South Korea. The K-pop fans in the study distinguished themselves from Koreaboos by considering themselves as fans who respect and understand the cultural contexts of K-pop. The interview participants' harsh criticism of Koreaboos revealed their concern about the stigmatization of K-pop and its fans. Jamie, a 23-year-old White fan, commented, "There's a very strong stereotype of K-pop fans as being those crazy, obsessive teenage fangirls who aren't even necessarily teenagers anymore." She sighed and added, "I like to think we're not so crazy; I know some of us are, but I try not to associate myself with those people, but I've met some Koreaboos in my time, and that's just not pretty." In distancing herself from this stereotype, she described one of her K-pop friends as a typical Koreaboo:

I don't know if it's a fetishization or not, because she does speak Korean . . . not too well, but just the level of informality is something that really grinds my gears. And, for the most part, yes, the Koreaboos are people who know "*oppa* [brother], *unnie* [sister], *saranghae* [I love you], *gwiyeopda* [it's cute]," and they use those words at the weirdest times. Like, we're not really necessarily talking about Korean things, and the people [i.e., Koreaboos] are like, "Oh yeah, my *unnie* [sister] is going to the supermarket later" or whatever.

In this manner, Koreaboos were considered fans who fetishize and fantasize about Korea and its culture and talk about their taste for Korean cultural artifacts all the time.⁴ Most interviewees agreed that a Koreaboo is a type of fan who disrespects Korean culture and is harmful to K-pop fan culture. While the term "Koreaboo" does not refer only to White fans of K-pop, the White interviewees seemed keenly aware of the criticism of the stereotype.

White young people's attempt to dissociate themselves from the stereotypes of White fans culturally appropriating Korean culture is also observed in their engagement with online/offline K-pop fan communities that are sometimes predominantly occupied by racialized youth (Asian Canadians in particular). These individuals were conscious about other (non-White) fans' probable accusations that they were culturally appropriating the other when

they encountered non- or anti-fans and especially fans of color. Several White fans in the study recalled how they felt at first within Asian-populated fan communities that they joined. In offline fan activities and club meetings, they felt visibly demarcated from people of color, who appeared to be the majority in terms of number. Maya, an 18-year-old White fan in Vancouver, joined local K-pop fan gatherings and realized that she was one of few White people at K-pop events and meetings:

First, it was a bit awkward because lots of places where you have K-pop had predominantly Asians. I was the only White girl there, and I just had to remember that I wanted to be there to enjoy this thing. That's how I got through it at first, but then I just kind of got used to it. I just got used to being the only White person in the whole place.

For Maya, engaging in K-pop communities was a process through which Whiteness as a norm was questioned. Like Maya, most White fans interviewed for this research interacted with fans of Asian heritage in online and offline contexts and, in so doing, became aware of the dominant Whiteness and racial hierarchies. Indeed, K-pop can function as a cultural resource for fans to reflexively engage with and challenge racist discourse (often in cyberspace), which would otherwise be invisible to them (Cho, 2022; W. Lee & Kao, 2021), and potentially help White fans to be aware of their privilege (K. Yoon, 2019).

However, White fans' participation in the K-pop universe may not always enhance their awareness of the existing racial inequalities to which K-pop idols and their fans of color are exposed. As Oh (2017, p. 2282) pointed out, compared to fans of color, White fans have relatively more power to negotiate and determine their position in the global K-pop community. For White fans in the study, the process of consuming a racialized cultural form involves the process of "identity tourism" or "identity passing," through which they can virtually, albeit temporarily, choose different avatars (Nakamura, 2002). White fans' process of negotiation also involved certain identity adjustment or camouflage. When distinguished from typical, mainstream White young people, these fans seemed to comfortably access and engage with the

K-pop universe. They sometimes described themselves as outsiders of the dominant cultural frame of Whiteness. For example, when asked to introduce herself to the researcher, who is a person of color, Audrey, a 28-year-old White fan in Vancouver, began by talking about how her mindset and cultural tastes differed from those of the typical White people:

I grew up in the Vancouver lower mainland. (. . .) hanging around with a lot of White people and stuff. But I always felt a little like a fish out of water . . . like I didn't really connect with others . . . my [White] peers I suppose.

This account was common among several other White young people in the study who distinguished their identities and cultural tastes from those of the imagined group of "mainstream White people." White fans' self-identification with the position of being marginal in the White-dominant cultural frame may imply a process of temporary racial passing. As sociological or ethnic studies have explored (e.g. Goffman, 1963), "passing" involves a shift from one identity position to another, especially when an individual feels miscategorized (Renfrow, 2004). In this regard, the White fans in this study seemed to show a certain identity negotiation strategy in their engagement with the K-pop universe. They did not explicitly hide their Whiteness but tried to dissociate themselves from the White-dominant cultural frame that racializes K-pop to some extent.

The White fans' identity passing in the present study implies that K-pop is signified as a consumable new cultural item through which feelings of liberal multiculturalism are offered. For Thelma, a 19-year-old White woman who is a dedicated fan of BTS, K-pop seemed to signify more multicultural media environments that helped individuals enjoy and grow up regardless of their backgrounds. She stated,

K-pop helped shape me as a person because it opened me up to a whole other culture. Because I grew up in such a White area, this new culture [made me feel] like "Whoa!"; it sort of helped me grow as a person.

In this manner, K-pop was consumed as a new, multicultural item for White audiences, while it was considered by other fans, most of whom were young

people of color, to be a racialized cultural form that remained the other of mainstream popular music. These different viewpoints may imply that the cultural meaning of K-pop can be negotiated by audiences' subject positions. For the White fans, K-pop was a signifier of liberal multiculturalism or cultural diversity, which can be achieved through cultural consumption.⁵

The rise of K-pop in Canada seemed to allow some White fans to feel more multicultural, as evidenced by the account of Anita, a 20-year-old White K-pop fan. Regarding BTS' US network TV debut performance at the American Music Awards (2021), she acknowledged that K-pop's global recognition serves to increase cultural diversity: "They [K-pop artists] are finally breaking through and getting the recognition that they can. It's important to have diversity." Sylvia, a 23-year-old White fan, suggested that the increasing popularity of K-pop might be an example of the increase in cultural diversity in her neighborhood. According to her, younger local residents were more accepting of other cultures:

We're accepting them, and that's like really WOW. That's cool . . . I think that's kind of nice that [we are] wanting to talk with them and communicate . . . Now, that's more of the younger generation, of course, while the older generation is going to keep to what they learned [and] what they grew up with . . . We're more open-minded [and] more accepting toward K-pop and other ones [i.e., cultural forms].

By consuming K-pop, some fans in the study identified themselves as culturally open-minded compared to those who were not familiar with K-pop or any type of non-Western pop music. Donna, a 19-year-old White woman who had been introduced to K-pop via her earlier interest in and search for Japanese anime online, stated, "I'm always open to new and different things." This self-proclaimed open-mindedness might reveal a colorblind perspective. For example, when asked to share her view on race relations among international K-pop fans, Whitney, a 24-year-old White fan, spoke only about individuals who were probably racist rather than pointing out any structural issues: "I don't know. I don't think I've noticed anything major. I think it depends on the person."

As discussed in this section, White fans may oscillate between probable audience positions that draw on anti-racist awareness and colorblindness in their engagement with K-pop. In doing so, they negotiate or reproduce their racially privileged position in consuming racialized texts. White fans may identify themselves as being on the margins of the dominant White cultural frame on some occasions, whereas on others they consider K-pop a cultural text through which liberal multiculturalism can be easily achieved as a matter of individual choice.

Diasporic Asian experiences

Diasporic Asian youth who grew up in Canada with their inherited or embodied memories of diasporic movements from Asia to elsewhere engage with K-pop in an audience position that might be different from that of White youth. In particular, some youth of Asian backgrounds have been observed as early adopters who engage in the grassroots dissemination and translation of K-pop in Western contexts, where Whiteness has been the cultural norm (Park, 2013; Sung, 2013). The interviewees generally agreed that Asian youth constitute a core group of K-pop fandom. The significant role of diasporic Asian youth in the Canadian K-pop fandom suggests that transcultural media flows are facilitated, at least in part, by audience members of migrant backgrounds (Athique, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2013).

Of course, diasporic Asians are not necessarily composed of a homogeneous fan base; they comprise diverse groups in terms of their (ancestral) home countries and family histories of migration. However, K-pop fans of Asian backgrounds seem to explore pan-ethnic identity and share a sense of racialized youth in Canada through consuming K-pop. Several studies of young people of East Asian heritage have shown that Korean media contributes to enhancing diasporic Asian youth's sense of pan-ethnic membership (Ju & Lee, 2015; Sung, 2013). Examining European youth of East Asian heritage, Sung (2013) found that East Asians in Europe who are relatively marginalized "may imagine and construct a transnational consumer group whose engagement with the Korean Wave demonstrates a longing to be part of a regional 'East Asian' community" (p. 145).

In response to the White-oriented cultural frame, interviewees of Asian backgrounds engage in K-pop scenes as dedicated fans and, in so doing, feel a sense of community. Alicia, a 21-year-old fan of several Korean, Japanese, and Chinese pop musicians, clearly linked her recent enthusiasm to her sense of pan-Asian identity. When asked what made her like K-pop, she noted, "It's very related to the whole theme of identifying with Asianness. K-pop is a bridge between my Chinese heritage and my experience living in North America." Alicia, who migrated to Canada from China as a child, distanced her cultural tastes and values from those of North Americans while positively describing K-pop's "Asian" values: "For Asians . . . it just feels kind of natural to like the music of your own people, right? (. . .) There's always this Asian humility in K-pop." For Esme, a 17-year-old of East Asian heritage, K-pop is one of the cultural resources through which she considered herself to be "just Asian compared to being a specific type of Asian" while avoiding being a "White-washed," "total Canadian." She found K-pop and K-entertainment "more relatable" because she is "Asian." As clearly shown in the accounts of Alicia and Esme, for many diasporic Asian fans, K-pop is often a symbolic means of affirming their Asian identity in their White-dominant peer culture. They might have been attracted to K-pop not only because of its textual attributes, such as its audio and visual components, but also because of its contextual attributes, such as its relation to their own diasporic identity and experiences as people of Asian background.

This meaning of K-pop as a pan-ethnic identity badge for racialized youth in White-dominant cultural contexts may not be surprising given the ongoing racialization of the non-White population in the Canadian society (Henry & Tator, 2010). Many interviewees in the present study felt that they were exposed to the existing racialization and stereotyping of Asians, which they had also experienced growing up. The experience of racial discrimination as people of color was shared among many Asian Canadian K-pop fans who identified with K-pop idols as culturally proximal role models. According to the accounts of several respondents of Asian descent, K-pop fandom involved a process of feeling good about themselves and their

ethnic backgrounds by knowing other Asian youth. This finding appears to resonate with Zubernis and Larsen's (2011) assertion of the "therapeutic potential of fandom in facilitating identity development" (p. 86). Furthermore, fans' engagement with pop cultural texts has been analyzed as a process whereby marginalized groups of media audiences explore, express, and negotiate their subject positions (e.g. Grossberg, 1992).

As K-pop is growing in popularity among Asian Canadians, knowledge of it is becoming a type of cultural capital among certain groups. Ava, a 22-year-old student in Toronto, stated that she socialized with Asian peers because of K-pop: "If you wanna hang out with your friends, I think you have to know about the trends and stuff. A lot of Asian kids are interested in K-pop. They talk to me because of K-pop." Those who were marginalized and racialized as non-White youth connect themselves with this new cultural genre made in Korea and, in doing so, may explore their self-empowered feelings of being Asian. In response to Canada's White-dominant mediascape, K-pop can be a cultural resource that enables diasporic audiences to engage with positive or reversed racialization, suggesting that the potential to generate a "counter-frame" exists (Feagin, 2013). That is, young Asian Canadians are challenging the racialization of Asians while affirming positive images of K-pop and its Asian fans. Thus, this reverse racialization can be an empowering process for Asian Canadian fans who have experienced racial discrimination and marginalization. Young Asian Canadians' consumption of K-pop can be a significant signal for the further development of a "counter-frame" against the White-centric cultural frame.

Due to their experiences of growing up racialized, some diasporic Asian participants in this study were critical of the liberal ideology of multiculturalism, which was celebrated by several aforementioned White fans. For the Asian Canadian youth in the study, K-pop may not necessarily be a sign of feel-good multiculturalism. While acknowledging increasing public interest in K-pop and K-dramas, along with multicultural atmospheres in their places of residence, such as Vancouver, several respondents noted that the visibility of K-pop in public media discourse may not

necessarily prove the social acceptance of non-Western pop culture. For example, Katlyn, a 19-year-old undergraduate of East Asian heritage, did not agree that K-pop could be a suitable example of advanced cultural diversity and multiculturalism. In her interview in 2017, she stated that K-pop and its fans were still marginalized, even among young people in Vancouver. She also claimed that multiculturalism should be more than the public's "exposure to different cultures," such as Korean pop culture or foods. She stated, "When they say we are multicultural, they may say that we're getting over racism, right? Some people may get over it, but there are still people who are not free from racism, which should go away."

While pan-ethnic identity is enhanced through the consumption of K-pop in diasporic contexts, this tendency does not mean that the sense of geocultural distance inscribed in K-pop has been entirely overcome. Most Asian Canadian fans, except for those of Korean heritage, seem to feel both culturally proximal and distant with regard to K-pop, expressing that K-pop is attractive because of its mixture of racial (cultural) proximity *and* foreignness. As such, for diasporic Asian youth, the looks and attitudes of K-pop idols feel familiar, but the language and some other areas of K-pop texts may feel foreign. Thus, they want to learn more and familiarize themselves with these new and yet not completely unknown cultural materials. Florence, a 20-year-old fan of Asian background, implied that K-pop's attraction is new and unfamiliar for not only White Canadian youth but also Asian Canadian youth. For example, K-pop idols are still relatively new, even to diasporic Asian youth who grew up with frequent exposure to mainstream Western stars:

Because Korean Canadians grew up watching these celebrities and, so, it's not something really special to them, they don't really go the extra mile to, you know, find out all they can and join communities and help sub or help the fandom with some things. But, you know, for other Asians, it's super foreign, and it's very new. And, so, it is very—probably more—intriguing than joining the Justin Bieber fan club because, you know, he's so around.

As Florence noted, Asian Canadian youth are not a homogeneous group. Young people of Asian

heritage who were born and raised in Canada may occupy a different audience position from those who migrated to Canada during their childhood, as the latter might already be familiar with K-pop in their country of origin. That is, among diasporic Asian youth, 1.5-generation and second-generation Asian Canadians may have different levels of familiarity with K-pop. Moreover, in terms of proximity to the Korean language and culture, young people of Korean background are demarcated among diasporic Asian youth in their consumption of K-pop.

There may be tension between diasporic Asian audiences on some occasions. While seeking to connect with transnational K-pop fan communities (and, eventually, cosmopolitan communities), in which sociocultural divisions are transcended (Hong, 2020), diasporic Asian youth fans sometimes encounter cultural impediments, such as language barriers and competition from Korean fans. The affective ties between overseas fans and remotely located idols are challenged by some Korean fans who claim to “own” the K-pop universe and show off their K-pop cultural capital (e.g. authentic knowledge and exceptional dedication). As fan communities are not free of cultural hierarchies in terms of race and gender, the reported tensions between international and domestic fans may be observed in global fandom. According to Berbiguier and Cho (2017), domestic (i.e. Korean) K-pop fans who associate K-pop with their national pride tend to evaluate overseas fans based on certain criteria: Japanese and Chinese fans are considered to be relatively significant others, whereas American and European fans are disapproved of because domestic fans view Western fans as lacking in loyalty to K-pop. The tensions between Korean fans and other fans reveal that popular culture consumption involves competition based on cultural capital. Those who allegedly own cultural capital may display and exercise their power over others, even among diasporic Asian youth.

Race matters

As illustrated by the fans’ accounts above, race still matters in the K-pop universe. White and diasporic audiences may experience the universe of K-pop differently. White fans in the study may not be free of “White standpoints” (Oh, 2017) or the “White racial

frame” (Feagin, 2013), despite their awareness of the racial stigma attached to K-pop and its fans. For White fans, K-pop is a new breed of a foreign cultural genre that differs from mainstream cultural content. Through certain identity negotiation processes, such as temporal “passing,” White fans can engage with the non-Western cultural texts that are conveniently available through digital platforms. In doing so, they sometimes consider K-pop a progressive or alternative symbol of a multicultural, inclusive Canadian society. In comparison, diasporic audiences may engage with K-pop with an awareness of their own racialized identity on the margin of the White-oriented media environment in which they grew up in. As a few Asian fans pointed out, K-pop and its fandom are still subject to severe racialization in the Canadian context and thus may not simply be an example of multiculturalism. From the critical perspective proposed by the interviewees, increasing the mainstream media’s attention to, and celebration of, K-pop can even conceal the systematic racism against Asians.

Of course, the findings in this article do not suggest that all K-pop fans are always keenly aware of the cultural politics behind the racialization of K-pop or that the racial tensions between White fans and fans of color are unequivocally marked in K-pop audience communities. The fans in the study often shared their feelings of belonging and of growing up together in the K-pop universes of their favorite idols (e.g. the BTS universe). Their common accounts can be summarized by Ashley, a 28-year-old White fan in Vancouver, who stated,

I found K-pop and the culture and the community during a very rough time in my life. And I’m still going through a few rough times, but it’s . . . it’s kept me going, and it’s given me some purpose, and it’s given me a community, and . . . I don’t know what I would do without it.

Like other fan objects and stars with whom young people feel as if they grew up (Duffett, 2013; Sandvoss, 2005), K-pop contributes to young people’s transition to adulthood (K. Yoon, 2019). According to several aca-fans’ observations, K-pop fans’ transnational affinity may transcend cultural barriers between fans of different backgrounds (Hong, 2020; McLaren & Jin, 2020). K-pop fans’ immersion in the virtual universe, which is filled

with the narrative of community and togetherness, may help enhance awareness of the existing social divisions that the world is facing. As demonstrated by BTS fandom's track record, some K-pop groups and their global fans have actively participated in anti-racist, social justice campaigns and charity work (Cho, 2022). However, the utopian and cosmopolitan K-pop universe may, to some extent, function to hide, rather than reveal, the still-existing racial and national tensions between different audience groups.

Conclusion

By utilizing the interview data, the article has examined how young fans in the Western context engage differently with K-pop in relation to their ethno-racial subject positions. The research findings suggest that fans renegotiate their cultural identities in consuming K-pop as a new cultural form that originates in a non-Western context. Recent studies of the Korean Wave have explored pop cosmopolitanism in K-pop and K-dramas by examining how Korean pop culture invokes desires to seek transcultural texts rather than familiar local texts and, in doing so, reimagine their local contexts and the process of globalization (H. Lee, 2018). However, the Korean Wave-driven cosmopolitanism's ethos might be differently negotiated and signified depending on the fans' positionalities. In this regard, this study comparatively analyzed White and Asian fans in their engagement with K-pop in the Canadian context.

White young people explore transcultural affinity while attempting to move beyond the existing racial hierarchies and power relations. In a way, this imagined community, drawing on transcultural affinity, seeks a cosmopolitan utopia. In comparison, fans of Asian backgrounds seem to engage with K-pop while feeling cultural and racial proximity to the idols and texts; of course, the feelings of cultural proximity are more evident among young Korean Canadians than other Asian Canadian groups. While K-pop as a music genre is characterized by its hybridity (Jin & Ryoo, 2014), the fans of Asian backgrounds in Canada affirm their sense of Asian Canadianness, which is often in opposition to the dominant White cultural frame, through their

participation in the imaginary universe of K-pop. For both White and diasporic Asian fans, K-pop is not free of racializing forces and the Western gaze. The K-pop universe provides cultural resources to (a) express and affirm pan-ethnic/racial identity (for Asian Canadian fans) or (b) perform racial passing (for White Canadian fans). These two different experiences—racial identification and racial passing—imply that complex dynamics exist in the signification of transnational cultural flows.

The young fans of different ethno-racial and cultural contexts show how cultural proximity to and distance from K-pop's geocultural origin dynamically contribute to reinforcing the versatile cultural meanings attached to K-pop. Transnational K-pop fans' experiences and positionalities expand the scope of reception studies by offering insights into the identity politics and negotiation involved in transnational media circulation, especially with the global emergence of a cultural genre that originates in a once-peripheral, non-Western context. It seems that regardless of their ethno-racial identities, K-pop fans attempt to share a sense of belonging to the virtual K-pop universe. However, different positionalities still matter, provided that K-pop remains defined as a racialized cultural genre in Western contexts and fans are not entirely free of their socioculturally divided, material universe.

As this qualitative study focused on a small subset of young K-pop fans of either White or Asian backgrounds residing in Canadian cities, the research findings may not be representative of global K-pop fans' experiences in general. As K-pop fandoms have been growing in various national and cultural contexts, the fans' positionalities continue to evolve and are becoming more diverse and complex than before. Further comparative studies of fans in different subject positions are required to better understand diverse fan positionalities. For example, the positionalities and experiences of Asian fans in Asia may potentially be different from those of Canadian-based fans of Asian backgrounds examined in this article.

Not unlike many other pop culture-driven universes, the K-pop universe may be a site for the struggle over meanings between different groups of people. The existing power relations in the *real* worlds may be temporarily concealed when the fans

are immersed in *virtual* worlds where they can relatively easily feel cosmopolitan. When singing along to BTS' "Permission to Dance," which spreads optimistic and cosmopolitan messages for the post-pandemic era (McIntyre, 2021), K-pop fans may share their hopes and participate in a virtual universe where pop cosmopolitanism is magically achieved beyond the existing social divisions. This virtual universe allows fans of various backgrounds to negotiate, or even transcend, existing contradictions such as racialized social order that they encounter daily. Transnational K-pop experiences offer fans moments to identify with idols, and other fans, and to explore a sense of being together in an imagined fan community. The experiences also reveal the existing, albeit obscured, gap between the socially divided *real* universe and the cosmopolitan *virtual* K-pop universe.

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Notes

1. In this article, the White fan refers to a person who identified themselves as White, Caucasian, and/or European Canadian. In the Canadian context, White is often considered a social color used to address people who belong to the majority group of society. Although White does not refer to a homogeneous group and there are diverse groups of people within the category of White, White is considered an overall socially privileged group, especially compared to non-White groups (Canadian Race Relations Foundation, 2015).
2. The author is especially grateful to Camila (Alex) Labarta-Garcia and YounJeen Kim for their research assistance.
3. Canadians' perceptions and feelings about South Korea have been relatively positive in recent years. According to the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada's (2020) biennial national opinion polls, Canadians' feelings about South Korea have become "warmer" in the past decade. Out of 10 (the warmest on the scale),

their feelings were 5.6 in 2012, 5.6 in 2014, 6.0 in 2016, 6.4 in 2018, and 6.7 in 2020. While the scores for South Korea have steadily improved and have been higher than those for several other Asian countries, such as Taiwan (6.6 in 2020), Hong Kong (6.2), Vietnam (6.3), India (5.7 in 2020), and China (3.6 in 2020), the scores for South Korea have been steadily lower than those for Japan (7.4 in 2020). According to the data, Canadians consistently have the "warmest" feelings for Japan compared to the scores for other Asian countries. Based on polls, Japan is the only Asian country whose score is as high as those of the United Kingdom or the European Union (7.5 or higher out of 10). Canadians' "warm" feelings toward Japan explain why some K-pop fans were already interested in Japanese culture and/or learned Japanese. This tendency has also been observed among European K-pop fans. Several empirical studies have found that Japanese anime, TV dramas, or pop music played a role in forming a bridge between the Korean Wave and some Western fans of Korean pop culture (Baudinette, 2020; Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021; Hong, 2013; Jin et al., 2021). Indeed, for some interviewees in the current study, Japanese pop music (J-pop) was seen as a "gateway to K-pop" (Choi, 2015), as some K-pop fans were introduced to J-pop prior to becoming enthusiastic about K-pop.

4. A Koreaboo has been defined as "a K-pop fan who loves everything about Korean culture, language, and Korean people without really knowing much about Korea" (King-O'Riain, 2021, p. 2835). Some scholars argue that a Koreaboo is a media construction that, in turn, affects overseas fans' pattern of engaging with K-pop. Western mainstream media has stereotyped K-pop fandom as a niche subculture led by excessive and immature fangirls; thus, the fans are conscious about and negotiate this negative public perception (Won et al., 2020). A widely known example of a Koreaboo is Oli London, a British YouTuber who is known for his enthusiasm for Korean culture and K-pop. Due to his exceptional desire to look Korean, and especially like a BTS member, London has had numerous plastic surgeries. He even uploaded his music video titled "Koreaboo" via media outlets in 2021, in which he expresses his admiration of Korean culture yet stereotypically portrays Korean cultural components. Interestingly, on several occasions during their interviews, a few interviewees who harshly criticized Koreaboos revealed their fascination with Korean culture in a manner that was similar to what a Koreaboo may do. For example, during her interview, Nyla, a 23-year-old

Vancouverite who lived in Seoul for a year primarily due to her interest in K-pop, kept emphasizing how fascinating everything was in South Korea: “All the Korean people I’ve met have been fantastic, and they’re so nice and they’re so friendly, and I just have such a good time with them.” Indeed, some accounts given by a few younger White fans in the present study can possibly be interpreted as fetishism of Korean culture. For example, Thelma, a 19-year-old, stated, “Maybe I was Asian in a past life and I’m just transcending over something [to being Korean and Asian] (laughs).” A few dedicated fans tended to essentialize Korea and its culture, which might be a tendency observed among Koreaboo-type fans from whom they attempt to distance themselves.

5. As critical race scholars claim, the popular Canadian discourse of liberal multiculturalism might reproduce the myth of a colorblind society (Henry & Tator, 2010). Henry and Tator (2010) argued that the concepts of diversity and harmony celebrated in the discourse of Canadian multiculturalism have the effect of excluding ethnic groups and people of color and containing them at the margin of society. According to the authors, the concepts of tolerance and diversity, which lie at the core of Canadian multicultural ideology, suggest that “while one must accept the idiosyncrasies of the ‘others’, the underlying premise is that the dominant way is superior” (Henry & Tator, 2010, p. 10). In Canada, multiculturalism has been adopted and promoted as a key national policy and as rhetoric for welcoming immigrants since the 1970s (Fleras, 2014). However, the top-down discourse of liberal multiculturalism has continuously been criticized for its limitations (Fleras, 2014; Henry & Tator, 2010).

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