

K-Pop in Latin America: Transcultural Fandom and Digital Mediation

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This article examines the transnational popularity of K-pop in Latin America. It argues K-pop as a subculture that transforms into transcultural fandom via digital mediation, further resulting in its accommodation into Latin American mass culture. The article further engages in a critical analysis of K-pop fan activism in Latin America to explore the transcultural dynamics of K-pop fandom. In doing so, the article provides a more holistic approach to the study of the Korean Wave in Latin America within the different “scapes” of globalization.

Keywords: K-pop, fandom, Latin America, digital culture, Korean Wave

The popularity of K-pop around the globe has garnered mass media publicity as Psy’s “Gangnam Style” reached number two on the Billboard Charts and became the most watched video on YouTube in 2012. Although newspapers, trade journals, and scholars have examined the growing transnational popularity of K-pop in East Asia, the reception and consumption of K-pop in Latin America have begun to receive serious scholarly consideration only in the last few years. Numerous reasons have been explicated for the international appeal and success of K-pop, but it also is important to understand that the transnational and transcultural fandom of K-pop cannot be confined solely to its metavisual aesthetics that creatively syncretize various genres of global popular music such as Black soul and J-pop. K-pop as hybrid music accentuated with powerful choreography is a form of visual spectacle but also promotes a particular kind of lifestyle represented by everyday modernity in which social mobility in the form of stardom becomes an important facet of the modernization process in Latin America. K-pop is thus more than just a transnational vector of global popular music; it is a metatext that further extends into modern consumer cultures such as fashion and technology.

More significantly, although there are many intersecting points between the Korean Wave in Latin America and other parts of the continent, Latin America offers an interesting case study for the examination of K-pop fandom because of the significant role that digital mediation plays in the appropriation of K-pop into mainstream Latin American culture. As Choi (2014) explains, K-pop fandom in

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Latin America is unique because, unlike the K-pop fans in East Asia, Latin Americans do not possess the financial freedom to travel to Korea to attend concerts of their favorite artists, prompting them to rely more on the digital to express their fan loyalty.

Nevertheless, despite the growing scholarship of K-pop in Latin America, many existing studies have focused more on the transnational appeal of K-pop in terms of its visual and sonic qualities. For example, drawing on quantitative analysis, Madrid-Morales and Lovric (2015) analyze the different attractive variables of K-pop to Latin American fans. In addition, Flores Yapuchura (2013) argues that young Peruvians are attracted to K-pop because it serves as a new symbolic referent to strengthen values of resilience and respect that have been slowly diminishing in the Peruvian society. Similarly, del Pilar Álvarez (2013) claims that K-pop allows Latin Americans to construct new meanings around Korea, a virtual and imaginary space that they cannot physically inhabit. Although these studies are valuable in probing the transnational popularity of K-pop to Latin Americans, my article is invested in exploring concrete ways that digital fandom practices popularize K-pop as a legitimate form of transcultural fandom in Latin American society.

In undertaking this analysis, I employ a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach to engage in what Iwabuchi (2010) describes as a "contextualized field research and a sophisticated understanding of their [fan] activities" (p. 88). Accordingly, I draw on interviews, surveys, and fan blogs to engage in a critical analysis of K-pop fandom in Latin America. I was privileged to have access to the results of an online survey conducted by the Korean Broadcasting System Broadcast Research Institute from December 8 to 19, 2012. In addition, I conducted a separate independent survey with 20 Latin Americans who are active members of various K-pop fan clubs on Facebook.² Rather than analyze the transnational appeal of K-pop, I espouse a holistic approach to the study of K-pop as well as *Hallyu* in Latin America via Appadurai's (1996) disjunctive "ethnoscape," "technoscape," and "mediascape" of globalization. I focus specifically on these three "scapes" because they have played the most pivotal role in the globalization of K-pop in Latin America. I also discuss the significance of Korea-Latin America relations as a catalyst to the development of K-pop as transcultural fandom, which is an area that many scholars have overlooked.

K-Pop as Transcultural Fandom

Transnational fandom is concerned primarily with the mobility of media and cultural products across national boundaries. It is often understood as a byproduct of resistance against the global dominance of U.S. popular culture, as well as a "contraflow" comprising non-Western media and cultural texts, further underscoring the decentering of globalization. In contrast, transcultural fandom is less concerned with mobility and more concerned with cross-cultural communication and identification, which further expands into cultural values and virtues, despite transcultural fandom's peripheral global status as a subculture. Fandom scholars Chin and Morimoto (2013) advocate for a new theory of fandom studies

² I would like to thank JungBong Choi for giving me access to the Korean Broadcasting System survey. Among the 1,345 survey respondents, 334 were from 16 countries in Latin America. The responses from the survey have not been reproduced in this article. The quotes reproduced in this article come from a survey conducted by myself. All translations of Spanish are mine.

that moves beyond a nation-centric framework to examine the nuances and complexities of transcultural fandom arising from "affective affinity" that draws fans to transcultural objects despite linguistic, cultural, and geographical boundaries, further provoking transcultural identification. In doing so, Chin and Morimoto (2013) employ Hills' concept of "transcultural homology" in which "homological structures may interpellate fans across cultures in ways that both operate through and exceed the intentions of media industries" (p. 99). Hills (2002b), in his examination of transcultural fandom of *otaku* in the United States and the United Kingdom, argues that fans in both national contexts share an identity of devaluation in the figure of the *otaku*, which leads to transcultural identification. Applying his argument, the "transcultural identification" of Latin American fans with K-pop is not a matter of cultural or national differences, but a means to cement their subcultural identity in the form of K-pop fan to counter their mass culture. In other words, Latin Americans' affective affinity for K-pop does not develop on its own; rather, it is an ongoing internalization process of mainstream culture into K-pop fan identity.

As Sullivan (2013) points out, the unique characteristic that defines a subculture is the "internalization of mainstream cultural materials into their own [fans] personal lives" (p. 196). Therefore, fans' assertion of subcultural identity leads to vibrant fan activism in which they function as cultural emissaries or what Otmazgin (2013) refers to as "cultural mediators" who play a key role in globalizing fandoms. This is a deviation from textual poaching practices common in other fandoms. More importantly, K-pop fans rely on the digital to accommodate K-pop into mainstream culture to gain legitimate media distribution outlets and attain recognition as a viable subculture despite its peripheral status in its national context. This slow appropriation of K-pop into Latin American mass culture thus blurs the clearly demarcated boundaries of subculture and mass culture in what Postigo (2008) describes as "practices of one community (fandom) bleeding into the other (mass culture)" (p. 71).

Cultural Diplomacy and K-Pop in Latin America

In the cover story "Characteristics and Potential of South America for Korean," Lee (2012) of the Korea Foundation for International Culture Exchange writes, "An interesting point about *Hallyu* in South America is that people's interest in Korean cultural content grew 'naturally' despite the geographical and cultural differences between Korea and South America" (para. 3). This is a commonly shared perception of the development of K-pop fandom in Latin America. This claim not only is reductive but also mirrors a narrow perspective of global media and cultural flows. It simplifies the discussion of the Korean Wave as solely a nascent cultural phenomenon rather than a historically informed cultural flow stemming from economic, political, historical, and social factors in the formation of the larger Korean cultural sphere in Latin America.

It is an anomaly that K-pop has penetrated the Latin American market and enjoyed success among young Latin Americans despite their lack of a shared common language and geographical proximity. In their article "Multiple Proximities Between Television Genres and Audiences," La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005) reappraise the notion of *cultural proximity* to argue that although the term is heavily dependent on language and geography, it also functions on many different levels. They write, "One way to begin thinking about the complex attractions between cultural texts and audiences is that there is cultural proximity at multiple levels" (p. 274). They further write, "Aspects of them are geographic or spatial:

local, subnational regional, national, supranational regional, global" (p. 274). They claim that there are multiple layers of cultural proximity, and cultural negotiation often occurs at the local level. The authors also invoke Singhal and Svenkerud's (1994) term *cultural shareability* to claim that audiences from different cultures might share "common values, images, archetypes, and themes across cultures that permit [TV] programs to flow across cultural boundaries" (p. 278).

The concept of multiple proximities is a useful starting point to understand the popularity of K-pop in Latin America both as a transnational and transcultural fandom that traverses national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries, and it induces us to make reductionist assumptions in an attempt to identify common themes and values in K-pop that resonate well across cultures, often ignoring questions of medium and genre specificity. For example, a 25-year-old female fan from Libertador San Martín, Argentina, wrote, "The style, choreography, and song lyrics are sound compared to the lyrics that people listen to in Latin America."³ Similarly, a 23-year-old female fan from Medellín, Colombia, responded, "The lyrics and melody of K-pop are very romantic; they talk about first love, deceptions, being in love, and unrequited love, which are different from Latin music (which I happen to like too). They are very sexual and women tend to be very romantic."⁴ Indeed, many Latin American K-pop fans have commented on the theme of "pure" romantic love invoked in K-pop lyrics.

These responses not only provide a simplistic understanding of the transcultural appeal of K-pop encapsulated in the universal theme of love but also illustrate, as Chin and Morimoto (2013) would argue, the role of "affective affinities that spark fan interest in transcultural fan objects" (p. 92). In addition, transcultural fandom in the form of K-pop consumption entails constant dialectical tensions with local mass culture. Perhaps, it was a coincidence that Latin Americans came across K-pop while navigating the Internet as active fans of Japanese manga and pop. Yet, the simultaneous fannish consumption of Japanese and Korean popular culture not only aligns with what Hills (2002a) would characterize as fans negotiating "multiple fandoms of varying intensities at different times" (p. 89), but indicates that transnational fandoms bleed into one another. Accordingly, K-pop fandom in Latin America did not emerge out of a vacuum, but is intimately intertwined with other transcultural fandoms. For instance, in the case of Latin America, what generated the spark of curiosity in Latin American listeners was the "Pump It Up" dancing game that played K-pop songs (Rocha, 2013). More significantly, the uniqueness of K-pop fandom in Latin America is that it is transcultural rather than transnational.

The Latin American nations that have been more receptive to Korean popular culture, in general, have historical ties to South Korea. The migration of the Korean diaspora to Latin America began as early as 1905 when thousands of Koreans arrived in Mexico as indentured servants. Korean migration to Latin America continued after a few decades as 50 Koreans immigrated to Brazil and 12 to Argentina between

³ "La moda, la coreografías, y las letras de las canciones. Son sanas a comparación con la letra de las canciones que se escuchan en Latinoamérica" (original quote in Spanish).

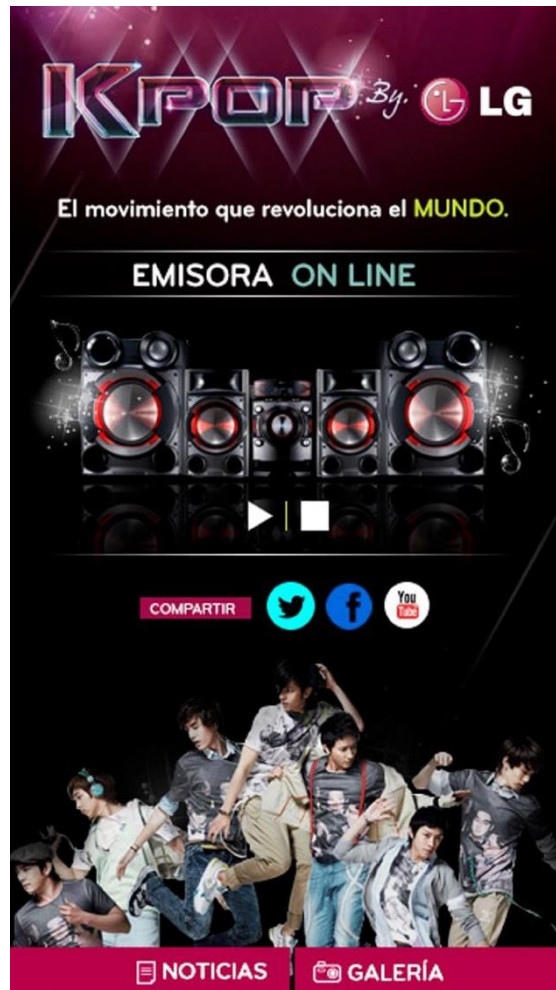
⁴ "La letra y la melodía del KPOP son muy románticas, hablan del primer amor, de decepciones amorosas, sobre estar enamorado y amor no correspondido, a diferencia de la música latina (que me encanta también). Son muy sexuales y la mujeres solemos ser muy románticas" (original quote in Spanish).

1956 and 1957 (Morimoto et al., 2004). During the 1960s, the second wave of Korean immigrants arrived in Mexico City and dispersed to Guadalajara, Tijuana, and Puebla (Castilla, 2009).

The incitement of Korean migration to Latin America opened doors for new business opportunities. Thus, Korean electronics corporation GoldStar (now known as LG) established business partnerships with Panama since 1962 through the export of color TV sets and video recorders ("Kümsöng Chungnammi," 1992). In 1977, Samsung Electronics also entered the Latin American market with the export of more than 40,000 color TV sets to Panama as the demand for color TV sets increased ("K'ölrö TV," 1997). A decade later, Samsung became the first Korean electronics company to establish an assembly plant in Tijuana, Mexico, with an investment of US\$420 million to manufacture electronic appliances such as color TV sets, refrigerators, and washing machines (Jyoung, 2003). There were two economic factors that led Korean companies to invest in Latin America: (1) cheap labor and (2) better access to the profitable North American market (Jyoung, 2003).

The growing visible presence of Korean businesses in Latin America meant a need for better trade relations, which resulted in the strengthening of the Korea–Latin America relationship in the 1990s and into the 2000s. As Jyoung (2003) explains, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and Panama had significant business investments from Korea. These nations represented 52.1% of the total US\$1.4 billion investment made in the Latin American region by the end of 2001 (Jyoung, 2003). In 2002, Korea and Chile became more active trade partners with the signing of the Free Trade Agreement. Most recently, Colombia became the third country after Chile and Peru to sign a bilateral trade agreement with Korea in 2013. As a result, Korea's overall trade with Latin America grew by 29% in 2010 to a record US\$48 billion. According to the Korea International Trade Association, Korean exports to Latin America jumped 30% to US\$29.7 billion, and imports from Latin America rose 27% to US\$14.1 billion (Bamrud, 2012). What is more interesting about these economic exchanges is the sheer number of Korean technological consumer products that have been introduced to Latin American consumers. Korea's top exported goods to Latin America include automobiles, electronics, home appliances, and petroleum products (Bamrud, 2012). The penetration of Korean products into the Latin American market helped publicize Korea as a technologically advanced nation to Latin American consumers, further cementing a national image of Korea affiliated with electronic brand names.

Thus, many Korean electronic brands, such as LG and Samsung, have been active partners in the promotion of their consumer products via K-pop in Latin America (see Figure 1). Most notably, LG sponsored a local K-pop dance contest known as K-pop LG in Colombia from 2011 to 2013. In 2012, Samsung became the official sponsor of the Big Bang Alive Galaxy Tour in which Big Bang, a South Korean boy band, made a world tour in 13 countries on four continents, including Peru. These Korean conglomerates also sponsor many locally organized K-pop contests in Latin America in partnership with the Korean Cultural Center and Korean embassy by giving away cameras, laptops, and miniaudio components to contestant winners for brand penetration purposes (see Figure 2).



**Figure 1. A K-pop mobile application available in Colombia.
Image courtesy of LG Electronics.**

The collaboration between major Korean electronics companies and cultural organizations in the promotion of K-pop across Latin America instilled a new perception about the country, enabling Latin Americans to distinguish Korea from other Asian countries such as China and Japan.⁵ According to a study mentioned in *Chosun Ilbo*, Korea ranks 10th in Chile in the category of national attractiveness, followed by 11th in Mexico, and 13th in Colombia ("Korean Brands Enjoy," 2009). More importantly, for Latin Americans, Korea signifies a modernized and an advanced technological capitalist society that Latin American nations strive to emulate. The concept of modernity is one of the most polemical ideas debated in Latin America. As Schelling (2000) notes, a "narrow, evolutionary understanding of the 'transition to modernity' in Europe was exported as a model to be followed by the 'developing world' in order to

⁵ This observation is based on my 10 years of experience living in the Caribbean and Latin America.

overcome poverty and reach comparable standards of living” (p. 6). Canclini (2000) explains that the development of modern societies based on European models was a central concern for Latin American nations. Canclini further argues that Latin America’s failure in the four processes of modernity (emancipation, renewal, democratization, and expansion) underscores “the current crisis of economic and cultural development in Latin America” (p. 39). On the contrary, for Latin Americans, South Korea as both a non-Western and postcolonial nation has achieved what seems to be a fluid transition to modernity under financial recession, neoliberalization, and globalization. As Peruvian foreign trade and tourism minister Jose Luis Silva stated at the Korea–Latin American Countries Business Forum held in Seoul in 2011, “The Koreans are a role model for us” (Bamrud, 2012).



Figure 2. A poster promoting a K-pop festival in Peru in 2013.
Image courtesy of LG Electronics.

The Twin Pillars of K-Pop

Besides the role of diplomacy in prompting the introduction of Korean brands and culture to Latin American consumers, both the intertextual and intermedial consumption of K-dramas via different distribution platforms have played an instrumental role in the development of K-pop as transcultural fandom in Latin America. Therefore, the distribution of K-pop in Latin America must always be examined in tandem with K-dramas because many Latin Americans have been first introduced to Korean popular music through dramas featuring idol stars.

The early distribution phase of K-dramas in Latin America was part of Korea's larger globalization project after the Korea–Japan World Cup in 2002 when South Korea caught global attention with the energy and fervor displayed by Koreans. As part of South Korea's official nation-branding campaign, popular Korean TV dramas such as *All About Eve*, *A Wish Upon a Star*, and *Winter Sonata* were distributed free to Latin American TV stations under the auspices of the Korean embassies in Latin America (Mérida, 2015). In the case of Chile, *Escalera al Cielo* (*Stairway to Heaven*) was first broadcast on TVN in 2006; in 2012, Mega transmitted *Casi el Paraíso* (*Boys Over Flowers*) from Mondays to Fridays at 12 p.m., which garnered a rating of 6.5 (Vallejos, 2012).⁶

In the case of Peru, a terrestrial TV station known as Panamericana TV began broadcasting K-dramas in 2006. Although Panamericana TV was not the first television station in Latin America to broadcast K-dramas, it aired hit dramas such as *My Lovely Samsoon* and *Stairway to Heaven* based on an agreement with the Korean embassy in Peru. According to Claudia Zavaletta, former assistant programming manager at Panamericana TV, the Korean embassy in Peru first offered K-dramas to TV Perú (the official national television channel of Peru) at a very low cost. TV Perú had already been broadcasting Japanese TV programs to its viewers (C. Zavaletta, personal communication, November 14, 2013). The embassy was searching for another media outlet and thus offered the same K-dramas to Panamericana TV. When the TV station started broadcasting K-dramas, audience demand was initially high. According to Zavaletta, K-dramas garnered a solid rating of 12 despite being broadcast at 9 p.m., the prime-time hour of TV programming, and competed against other locally produced TV programs (C. Zavaletta, personal communication, November 14, 2013). As K-dramas became more widely accessible online, ratings suffered. Moreover, the shift toward the production of reality-based TV programs, hourly formats, and constant changes in the station's programming lineup further caused K-dramas to slide to a mediocre rating of 6 in recent years. In 2015, under the auspices of the Korean Cultural Center in Argentina, the Argentinian TV channel Magazine broadcast *The Secret Garden* every Saturday at 8 p.m. (Trzenko, 2015).⁷ Most recently in 2016, *Telefé*, a terrestrial station in Argentina, aired *Stairway to Heaven*.

K-Pop Fan Activism and Digital Mediation

Just like any other fandom across the globe, K-pop fans in Latin America rely on the digital as they engage actively in diverse fan activities, such as sharing recent news about their favorite idols or artists, circulating new music videos, or serving as DJs for online streaming K-pop radio stations. K-pop fans in Latin America not only function as communities formed around shared interests and values but also reflect the rapidly changing digital culture in Latin America and K-pop's influence on the latter. For instance, a 23-year-old female fan from Medellín, Colombia, stated, "Yes, definitely. During my spare time, I spend approximately 17 or 18 hours a day on the Internet watching dramas and searching for their protagonists and soundtracks, which are things that I never did before. I also browse social media for

⁶ A single rating equals 1% of all households with TV sets.

⁷ The decision to broadcast K-dramas in Argentina is attributed to the online petitions organized by K-drama fans in Argentina and the Korean Cultural Center in which more than 13,000 participated in the movement.

groups or pages that share the same interest in the dramas.”⁸ Another 23-year-old male fan from Veracruz, Mexico, similarly said, “Yes, now more and more fans of K-pop make an effort to acquire the stylish gadget in Korean dramas or applications like Line or KakaoTalk, among others.”⁹

When asked how the popularity of K-pop and K-dramas has shaped digital media practices, a 25-year-old female K-pop fan from Libertador San Martin, Argentina, responded,

The Internet is the only medium that we have to stay informed about K-pop artists since media like TV or radio no longer do it. We had to learn ways to communicate with Korea and other countries in order to receive information. We had to learn how to use Korean applications (Naver and Line), and yes, it has transformed our use of digital media.¹⁰

A 23-year-old female fan from Santiago de Cali, Colombia, responded similarly to the same question:

It was sufficient to only use the Internet for a variety of things (such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.) and to communicate with friends and families. But with the arrival of K-pop, you get to know many different groups and the Internet is the only means that many consumers and fans of K-pop can vote for their favorite bands and watch live contests featuring new K-pop bands (such as Who is Next YG Entertainment 2013). Everything revolves around digital media and it is the only way to support your favorite bands and learn more about them from afar.¹¹

Similar to other technologically advanced continents such as Asia, Europe, and North America, Latin America is becoming more wired, and the Internet allows its citizens to easily consume and appropriate media and music from around the globe. According to the Americas Society/Council of the Americas, there

⁸ “Sí definitivamente . . . yo en lo personal el tiempo que gasto en internet viendo drama y buscando a sus protagonista y ost es de aproximadamente de 17 o 18 horas (al día) . . . cosa que nunca había hecho. . . . Constantemente los busco en las redes sociales . . . busco grupos o páginas con el mismo interés en los dramas” (original quote in Spanish).

⁹ “Sí, ahora más y más fans del K-POP se esfuerzan por obtener el gadget de moda en los dramas coreanos, o apps como LINE ó KAKAOTALK, entre otras” (original quote in Spanish).

¹⁰ “Internet es el único medio que tenemos para estar informados acerca de los artistas del kpop ya que ningún medio como TV o radio lo hacen. Hemos tenido que aprender de algún modo como comunicarnos con Corea y otros países para recibir información. Hemos tenido que aprender a usar aplicaciones totalmente en Coreano, y digamos que si, ha transformado nuestro uso de los medios digitales” (original quote in Spanish).

¹¹ “Sí bastante debido a que sólo se utilizaba el internet para variedad de cosas (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) sólo para una comunicación entre amigos y familia pero al llegar el Kpop, conoces muchos grupos y es la única forma que muchas personas y fans del Kpop pueden votar por sus grupos favoritos, que pueden ver en vivo algún concurso de algún nuevo equipo de Kpop (who is next-YG ENTERTAINMENT 2013). Todo gira alrededor de los medios digitales y así apoyar a tus grupos favoritos, es lo único que podrías hacer desde lejos y para conocerlos más” (original quote in Spanish).

are approximately 255 million Internet users in the Caribbean and Latin America. Despite the staggering number, these data indicate that access to the Internet is not equally distributed across all regions. For example, the Internet penetration rate in Peru, a country that has been very receptive to K-pop, grew from 3.0% in 2005 to 36.5% in 2011 (Glickhouse, 2013). In addition, data from the National Institute for Statistical Information indicate that only 16% of Peruvian households had an Internet connection, whereas 56% of Peruvians were able to access the Internet in 2011 (OpenNet Initiative, 2013). Although these statistics indicate the continuing presence of a digital divide in Latin American societies, further segmented by issues of class and geography, they illustrate that access to K-pop is confined to those who have access to the Internet, further rendering it as a transcultural subculture on the peripheries of Latin American mass culture.

Despite the technological barriers that Latin America still faces today, Latin Americans' participation in K-pop fan culture via different digital media practices is nothing novel compared with other fandoms across the globe. But what makes K-pop fandom in Latin America unique is that fans are invested in imparting the embodied values and beliefs of their favorite artists rather than engaging in the manipulation of original songs or music videos to create new cultural texts that are specific to their local culture. In other words, K-pop fans in Latin America participate more in affective consumption, underscoring "cultural fidelity" as an essential fabric of their fandom. Instead of reappropriating K-pop to meet their cultural tastes, Latin American fans adapt to new cultural practices to recognize and validate themselves as transcultural fans. Moreover, the ongoing efforts of these fans to accommodate K-pop transculturally into mainstream Latin American media and culture are an indication of the ongoing tension between popular culture from "other" or foreign countries and cultural industries in Latin America, as K-pop slowly receives recognition from Latin American society as a legitimate fandom.

According to my e-mail communication with A*Dream (AsianDream), a popular K-pop dance cover group based in Mexico, fandom activities involving money collection and gift mailing to their favorite artists or idol bands are not part of Latin American fan culture. A member of A*Dream who I interviewed explained,

Something that has caught our attention is the inclusive manner in which one expresses his or her opinion or criticizes an artist. The fans have changed their criticisms and appreciation of certain situations as if they were in Korea. For example, if a member of an idol band has a boyfriend or girlfriend, or finds him- or herself in a scandal, which is common in Latin America, the fans view these instances negatively and their attitudes toward them are also negative. Not all the fans are like that, but there are a significant number of K-pop fans in our group who have changed their behaviors. (W. Romero, personal communication, November 28, 2013)¹²

¹² "Algo que llama mucho nuestra atención es que inclusive en la manera de "opinar" o "criticar" a un artista, los fans han cambiado sus críticas y apreciación de ciertas situaciones como si estuvieran en Corea. Ejemplo, si un idol tiene novio o novia o se encuentra en un escándalo que normalmente en países latinoamericanos es normal, los fans de aquí lo ven como algo malo y su actitud hacía este tipo de

A typical fan activity that is distinctive to Korean culture is “wreaths of rice,” known in Latin America as *coronas de arroz*. In this particular fan activity, Koreans purchase wreaths of rice and send them to their favorite artists as a sign of affection. Latin American fans have adopted this popular fan activity. For instance, in 2013, a fan club of the K-pop idol group 2PM based in Nicaragua joined efforts with other fan clubs scattered in other Latin American countries to purchase 20 kg of white rice, which they sent to 2PM to congratulate them on their performance in Seoul (K-pop Nicaragua, 2013). This is not only an example of affective affinity but also a form of transcultural fan labor in which fans remain faithful to a fannish activity that is culturally specific to a nation, thus further ensuring cultural fidelity.

Also, Wax Kim, a former disc jockey for an online K-pop Mexico radio station (<http://www.k-pop.com.mx/radio/>) catering to Latin American listeners, explained to me how K-pop fans in Latin America would pay out of pocket to organize special events dedicated to their favorite idol bands. For example, administrators of fan clubs in Latin America often rent movie theaters and organize public screenings of K-pop music program such as *Inkigayo* (see Figure 3). For such organized events, administrators sell the admission ticket for US\$3 (W. Kim, personal communication, December 19, 2012). These examples of fan activities help create a unique fan culture in Latin America, which allows them to share this particular transcultural experience, further rendering the internalization of K-pop music into their everyday lives.

In other words, Latin Americans’ growing engagement with K-pop through different social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, evolves into digital communities where reassertion of social and cultural identities occurs within the participation in everyday modernity. Latin Americans’ affective identification with virtues of K-pop idols and artists in overcoming social struggles, especially class conflicts, in achieving their stardom induces Latin Americans to construct new subjectivity in which social mobility is imagined. In an ethnographic study on the reception of the Korean Wave in Peru and Brazil, Ko, No, Kim, and Simões (2014) found that Latin Americans who passionately consume Korean media and popular culture are members of the lower social class. Thus, for Latin American fans, the provocation of transcultural identification with K-pop offers an alternative social space where fans can imagine becoming a modern subject through the dissolution of class hierarchies. When I asked the fans how K-pop has affected their characters, an 18-year-old female fan from Mexico City explained,

I like K-pop very much without separating it from Asian culture; Asian culture is very spiritual. The change I experienced was beyond my identity: how hard work, effort, and desire to get ahead can lead to a good outcome. I work harder daily in order to be able to continue my life and to fulfill my biggest dreams and those that no one would want to try. This does not stand out in our culture; in fact, it rarely does.¹³

situaciones es mala. No todos los fans son así pero hay una población considerable dentro de los Kpopers que ha cambiado su comportamiento” (original quote in Spanish).

¹³ “Me gusta mucho el Kpop pero sin separarlo de la cultura asiática como tal; la cultura asiática es muy espiritual. Mi cambio fue algo más de identidad: de como el trabajo duro, el esfuerzo y las ganas de salir adelante te pueden llevar a un buen fin. Me esfuerzo más a diario para poder seguir mi vida y cumplir mis sueños así sean los más grandes y los que nadie quiera intentar. Esto no sobresa en nuestra cultura, de hecho muy pocas veces” (original quote in Spanish).



**Figure 3. 2PM México fans gathered in a movie theater.
Image courtesy of 2PM México.**

A 21-year-old fan from Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas, Mexico, responded,

It has motivated me to want to learn a new language, and, as a woman, the aspect of makeup. I was someone who usually didn't wear makeup, but I found that aspect of culture is attractive; and I now wear it for self-esteem.¹⁴

A 17-year-old female fan from Palmira, Colombia, responded,

Yes, it has influenced my way of thinking, acting, and deciding. Socially, too. Now I always look for an opportunity to meet more people with similar interests via K-pop and

¹⁴ "Me ha motivado a querer aprender un nuevo idioma y como mujer el aspecto del maquillaje, soy una persona que no solía hacerlo pero encontré ese aspecto cultural atractivo y lo hago por simple autoestima" (original quote in Spanish).

think that K-pop is a subculture where everyone in the world can be accepted, and it is like a big family.¹⁵

A 19-year-old female fan from Veracruz, Mexico, similarly responded, "Yes, it has influenced me personally. The people that I interact with are not the same; my eyes and ears have opened to a different world outside of the United States and Canada."¹⁶

All of the aforementioned survey responses highlight K-pop having some impact on the social identities of Latin American fans. Virtues encapsulated in K-pop stars, such as hard work, resilience, patience, and dedication required in fulfilling one's dream, are internalized into the personal lives of Latin American fans. They see K-pop idols and bands as role models that they strive to emulate in helping them (re)imagine a new sense of social identity as an everyday and modern cosmopolitan subject that frees them from the constraints of society. Hebdige (2002) argues that members of a particular subculture express an alternative identity within the formation of an intermediate space. He further claims that subculture allows one to exercise autonomy from the constraints of society. Latin Americans' affinity for K-pop does not touch on the issue of resistance or opposition toward U.S. hegemony or imperialism; rather, it induces Latin American K-pop fans to navigate an interstitial space of social identity in which social struggles can be overcome. Therefore, Latin Americans' transcultural identification with K-pop is not about the exotic appeal or the "otherness" of Korean culture; rather, the consumption of Korean culture allows them to imagine a new social identity not restricted to social hierarchies. This search for an alternative identity suggests that K-pop fans are in a constant personal battle with the perception of the dominant society, often becoming victims of peer scrutiny, such as being name-called *loco/a* (crazy) for listening to what their friends and family members often describe as *música de chinos* [Chinese music] (Cami9, 2013; Diaz, 2013). Despite these interpersonal struggles, what keeps the Latin American fans intact as a tight-knit community of fans is the intangible social exchange values that K-pop brings them to their personal lives. When I asked A*Dream, "Why do you love K-pop and what benefits does it bring to you?" They explained,

A*Dream loves K-pop because we value the formation of their artists and idols. We know that they are people who have prepared for many years, and behind every new video and song exists years and months of hard work. . . . What we respect about K-pop is that it has granted us an opportunity to realize our dreams through the medium of music, brought us the joy of sharing an interest with our friends, and learned to

¹⁵ "Sí, ha influido en mi forma de pensar, actuar y en el decidir. También en lo social ya que siempre busco la oportunidad de conocer más personas con mis mismos gustos por el K-pop, y siento que el K-pop es una subcultura donde todo el mundo puede ser aceptado y es como una gran familia" (original quote in Spanish).

¹⁶ "Sí ha influido en mi persona. Las personas con las que me relaciono no son las mismas, mis ojos y oídos se han abierto a un mundo diferente fuera de Estados Unidos y Canadá" (original quote in Spanish).

organize and manage a group of people and to work as a team. (W. Romero, personal communication, November 28, 2013)¹⁷

Although one cannot make a reductive claim that K-pop alters the identities of Latin Americans because identities work on many different levels, we can deduce that the consumption of K-pop is clearly a type of identity expression in the form of interpellation where fans are immersed in ideological structures of K-pop that shape their identities, which lead them to misrecognize themselves as participating in the imaginary worlds of their favorite K-pop idols and artists.

What is further unique about K-pop fandom in Latin America is that its status as a subculture has not continuously remained submerged under the dominant mainstream culture. As a digitally mediated fandom, the accommodation of K-pop into mainstream culture has further implications for the national cultural industry, as well as how it gets appropriated into the mainstream culture to reach its transnational fandom status. Accordingly, K-pop fan activism in Latin America is not only a shared community of K-pop aficionados, but further expands into mainstream culture to be disseminated through legitimate distribution channels in opposition to Internet piracy culture. A concrete example of the contestation between the mainstream culture and subculture occurred on August 31, 2011, when the official Facebook page of the popular Peruvian dance reality show *El Gran Show* (*The Grand Show*) posted a survey question to its viewers. (The show is broadcast on Americana Television and features 11 dance contestants who compete against each other in different music genres.) The question was, "What rhythm would you like to see our heroes and dreamers dance in our 5th gala?"¹⁸ More than 2,300 comments were posted in response to this survey question, and the majority of Facebook users requested that the show feature K-pop dance. For example, one Facebook user posted, "Korean music K-pop will be something innovative" (Mendoza Marreros, 2011).¹⁹ Another Facebook user posted, "K-pop is a big challenge because it has a variety of choreography; let's see if contestants can dance to it. If they do, we, the fans of K-pop, will be glued to the TV screen without taking our eyes off for a minute" (Kim, 2011).²⁰ Another user posted, "K-pop would be the best . . . and to everything else that always repeats . . . to see something of a novelty" (Sambrano, 2011).²¹ Despite the activism of K-pop fans, the producers of *El Gran Show* reluctantly ignored their opinions because of K-pop's subcultural status in Latin America; instead, the

¹⁷ "A*Dream ama el K-Pop porque valoramos la formación de sus artistas y idols. Sabemos que son personas que se preparan por muchos años y que detrás de cada video y nueva canción existen años y meses de elaboración. . . . En lo que respecta a nuestro grupo (A*Dream) el K-Pop nos ha traído la oportunidad de hacer realidad nuestro sueño de estar en el medio musical, nos ha brindado la satisfacción de compartir un gusto con nuestros amigos y aprender a organizar y administrar a un grupo de personas y trabajar en equipo" (original quote in Spanish).

¹⁸ "Que ritmo te gustaría ver bailar a nuestro heroes y soñadores en nuestra 5th gala?" (original quote in Spanish).

¹⁹ "Música coreana el KPOP sería algo innovador" (original quote in Spanish).

²⁰ "kpop es gran desafío tiene varias coreografías, a ver si pueden bailar eso . . . si lo hace nosotras las fans de kpop estaremos mirando allí en la tele sin despegar ningún minuto" (original quote in Spanish).

²¹ "k pop sería el mejor . . . ia q todo lo demas siempre lo repiten . . . de ve de haber algo novedoso" (original quote in Spanish).

producers announced on the show's Facebook page that the rhythm of cumbia would be featured in the next program. The program's failure to officially recognize K-pop as a fabric of Latin American music culture because of its inferior cultural status as toxic foreign music is an illustration of television's investment in the dissemination of nationalist narratives, as the original question asked which music Peruvians would like to see their "heroes and dreamers" dance to.

El Gran Show is a further testament to how K-pop fans as cultural emissaries actively participate in dialectical tension between the local and the global as they engage in fan activism to accommodate K-pop into the national popular culture. As the producers of the show ignored the comments of Facebook users, enraged K-pop fans voiced their resentment toward the program for its aversion. Some of the criticisms voiced against the program included

Well, K-pop obtained more than 2,000 votes and cumbia wins. They should not ask that type of question if they do not respect the votes of Internet users. There are about 2,235 comments requesting K-pop!!! And you put on cumbia??? In which world do you live? We have already seen this thousand times. (Asia Light World, 2011)²²

Another Facebook user wrote with resentment,

Seriously, I am not going to watch *The Grand Show*, what *Grand Show*!! For god's sake, they should have innovative choreography. They repeat the same dance all the time for all seasons . . . it bores me. They should change or improve . . . what infuriates me the most is why even bother to ask if they are not going to pay attention. Okay, I no longer get angry . . . only. (as cited in Asia Light World, 2011)²³

This example of activism illustrates that K-pop fandom is no longer restricted to affective consumption but also converts into affective labor against the dominant hegemonic media structures and power.

As the enraged fans continued to engage in affective labor via online comments for not recognizing K-pop fans as a critical mass, the original announcement on the official *El Gran Show* Facebook page was later removed; then, on November 10, 2012, a little more than a year after this online uproar, *El Gran Show* featured K-pop dance for the first time. The competitors appearing in the program danced to the rhythms of Shinee's "Ring Ding Dong," Big Bang's "Fantastic Baby," Super Junior's "Sorry, Sorry," and, of course, Psy's "Gangnam Style." On November 20, 2012, Peruvian newspaper *El Comercio*

²² "Vaya, el kpop obtuvo más de 2000 votos, y gana la cumbia, no Deberían Hacer ese tipo de pregunta si es que no respetan el voto de los cibernautas, hay como 2235 comentarios pidiendo K-pop!!!!.....Y uztds ponen ¿¿¿¿¿¿¿¿¿¿¿¿¿¿¿¿¿¿¿¿cumbia???????????? n q mundo viven eso ya lo hemoz visto miles d veces" (original quote in Spanish).

²³ "de verdad yo no voy a ver el gran show..que gran show!!..por dios deben tener coreografías innovadoras...TODO LO QUE BAILAN SE REPITE SIEMPRE..EN TODAS LAS TEMPORADAS..YA ABURRE.DEBERIAN CAMBIAR O MEJORAR..LO QUE MAS ME ENFURECE ES QUE POR QUE PREGUNTAN SI NO VAN A HACER CASO!! BUENO YA no me hago higado.., solo.." (original quote in Spanish).

featured an article in which the producer of the show, Ricky Rodríguez, expressed his contentment because the ratings for the show had increased from 8 to 14 in the last few weeks. However, the producer did not acknowledge the role that K-pop played in elevating the show's ratings, which further frustrated K-pop fans ("Productor de 'El Gran Show,'" 2012). Another newspaper article published in *La República* also reported that *El Gran Show* beat its competitor program *El Valor de Verdad* (*The Value of Truth*) in ratings for the first time. *El Gran Show* garnered a rating of 15.9 compared with *El Valor de la Verdad's* 14.3 rating ("'El Gran Show' Venció por Primera Vez," 2012). Again, the newspaper's failure to give due credit to the show's success ignited online comments in which K-pop fans pointed out that it was the inclusion of K-pop that helped to catapult the show's ratings.

Another example of how K-pop is appropriated into Latin American mainstream media is when it was first featured on "Bailando por un Sueño" ("Dancing for a Dream") in 2014, a segment of *Showmatch*, one of the most watched prime-time TV programs in Argentina. With the support of DJ Mosquito (Alejandro Velazquez) who oversaw the program's music and worked as the director of VEGA Radio, which streams online 24 hours of K-pop music, *Showmatch* showcased K-pop to the Latin American audience. To celebrate this milestone achievement, K-pop fans in Argentina organized a flash mob through social media platforms, including Facebook. On November 23, 2014, fans gathered at Planetario Galileo Galilei in Buenos Aires to perform a flash mob ("Flashmob en el Planetario," 2014). The event was streamed live on cable channel C5N.

The cultural contestation between K-pop fans and Latin American popular media is a true testament to how a transnational subculture on the fringes of Latin American mass culture reluctantly yet slowly gets accommodated into mainstream culture. More importantly, it demonstrates how K-pop fans in Latin America participate in vibrant digital mediation to obtain official recognition of their fandom as it is disseminated through national media outlets to gain its status as both transnational and transcultural fandom.

Conclusion

The study of K-pop in Latin America as a transnational vector of the Korean Wave indicates K-pop fandom as transcultural rather than transnational in which Latin Americans' development of affective affinity for K-pop is not rooted in its exoticism and cultural novelty. The development of transcultural identification with K-pop is the result of fans' simultaneous consumption of multiple transcultural fandoms. More importantly, Latin Americans' affective affinity for K-pop is in constant oscillation with their mass culture as it undergoes the process of cultural emission. As Latin American fans engage actively with the affective consumption of K-pop, fans negotiate social identities in the form of class struggles that resist the hegemonic class hierarchies as a result of neoliberal forces in Latin America.

In considering the popularity of K-pop in Latin America as a transcultural fandom, one must consider the conflating issues of diplomacy, economy, migration, and media exchange that have resulted in crystallizing K-pop as a digitally mediated intermedial and intertextual fandom in conjunction with other media genres and formats. More significantly, K-pop gets accommodated into mainstream culture via digital fan activism that further gets distributed through legitimate media distribution platforms. Finally, K-

pop does not directly travel across national and geographical boundaries as a transnational fandom, but more so as a distinctive form of transcultural fandom that deconstructs the dominant theoretical paradigm of the East–West, informing studies of media and cultural flows within the forces of globalization.

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