

# Transnational fandom in the making: K-pop fans in Vancouver

**Kyong Yoon**

University of British Columbia Okanagan, Kelowna, Canada

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## Abstract

This study examines how young people become, and feel about being, K-pop fans in a Western context, which is geographically and culturally distant from K-pop's place of origin. Drawing on qualitative interviews with K-pop fans in Vancouver, Canada, the study explores (1) how young fans encounter K-pop and negotiate its cultural distance, (2) how K-pop and its fandom are stereotyped by non-fans, (3) how the stereotypes are negotiated by the fans, and (4) how the fans engage in a particular sense of belonging through K-pop.

## Keywords

Transnational, fandom, K-pop, Korean pop culture in Canada, transnational media

## Introduction

On 19 November 2017, the South Korean boy band BTS performed its hit song 'DNA' in front of a chanting audience at the American Music Awards in Los Angeles. This live performance, which was the group's United States (US) network TV debut, elicited not only enthusiastic responses from fans at the venue and online but also favorable media reviews. The *Los Angeles Times* described BTS's performance as one exceptionally 'strong showing' among the mostly disappointing individual performances at the show that night (Wood, 2017). This example reveals intriguing aspects of a recent phase of the Korean Wave (the global flow of Korean pop culture)—that is, how Korean pop culture spreads beyond geo-cultural proximities and without traditional media gatekeepers (such as broadcast media). As exemplified by BTS, several K-pop groups have been followed by a large number of global fans long before, or without even having, their network TV debut. On a global scale, K-pop illustrates the fan-based, new media-driven, transnational flows

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## Corresponding author:

Kyong Yoon, Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies, University of British Columbia Okanagan, Kelowna, BC V1V 1V7, Canada.

Email: [kyong.yoon@ubc.ca](mailto:kyong.yoon@ubc.ca)

of youth culture, which extend beyond racial, cultural, and/or linguistic proximities.

K-pop refers to a particular genre of Korean pop music that is widely known for its boy/girl bands ('idols') and their signature dance performances and music videos. This pop music genre has increasingly been recognized beyond Asia, especially since the 2010s. Throughout the 2010s, the popularity of K-pop has reportedly surged among groups of young fans across different continents (e.g., Choi, 2015; Han, 2017; Jin, 2016; Oh, 2017). This rapid spread of non-Western pop music among young people on a global scale is a unique trend in several respects. K-pop does not necessarily appeal to the conventional niche market of world music, in which non-Western music is marketed to Western audiences as an 'authentic traditional' sound (Brusila, 2001). K-pop has not only targeted ethnic or diasporic audiences of Korean or East Asian backgrounds but has also become appropriated into mainstream media in some cases (Han, 2017). Furthermore, the global K-pop phenomenon has been driven by networked fan bases, whose members extensively deploy social media platforms, as exemplified by the vast amount of online user-generated content that exists (Han, 2017; Jung, 2015; Oh, 2017).

However, the recent growth of the K-pop fandom cannot be easily defined as a homogeneous trend. As K-pop's fan bases are spread out across different, albeit networked, geo-cultural regions, the fans' engagement with K-pop may be diverse, depending on locally specific constraints that block transnational media flows and available resources that enable fans to access and appropriate K-pop. In this regard, this study examines how young people outside Asia, an under-researched demographic in Korean Wave studies, become, and feel about being, K-pop fans. In particular, drawing on qualitative interviews with K-pop fans in Vancouver, Canada, the study explores (1) how young fans encounter K-pop and negotiate its cultural distance, (2) how K-pop and its fandom are stereotyped by non-fans, (3) how the stereotypes are negotiated by the fans, and (4) how the fans engage in a particular sense of belonging through K-pop.

By examining how young people are exposed to K-pop and initiated as K-pop fans in a Western context, which is culturally and geographically distant from K-pop's country of origin, the diversity of the K-pop fan audiences can be better understood. Moreover, given the lack of transnational perspectives in fan studies (Morimoto, 2017), this study can contribute to advancing fan and audience studies through its in-depth analysis of the transnational construction and negotiation of K-pop among its overseas fans.

## **How to understand transnational fans**

Despite a gradual increase in the number of in-depth studies of K-pop fan experiences, there are insufficient qualitative data on K-pop fans in the Western contexts—North America and Western Europe in particular. Until recently,

most English-language studies on K-pop fans and audiences have addressed the Asian audiences. Otherwise, the recent studies on K-pop have examined particular groups of young fans outside Asia, such as Western-based youth of Asian origin (Yoon, 2017) and Latin American audiences (Choi, 2015; Han, 2017), or analyzed online comments of English-speaking fans (Jung, 2013; Oh, 2017; Shim and Noh, 2012). In regard to research on K-pop, the lack of Western case studies, especially those related to the regions in the Global North, may not be surprising given the fact that K-pop's global reach beyond Asia has been a relatively recent trend and particular geo-cultural regions, such as Latin America, have arguably been home to vibrant K-pop fan bases outside Asia (Choi and Maliangkay, 2015; Epstein, 2017).

Fan studies in general have suffered from the lack of transnational empirical data and insights (Morimoto, 2017). In particular, fan studies have not engaged sufficiently with transnational flows of non-Western cultural texts. Only in the past several years—10 at most have scholars in cultural and media studies conducted in-depth empirical and theoretical studies of transnational or transcultural fans. Influential fan studies books published in English include minimal discussion about the transnational dimensions of fan studies, such as non-Western media texts and their global fans (e.g., Duffett, 2013; Hills, 2002; Sandvoss, 2005). Gray et al.'s (2007, 2017) collections exceptionally attempted to cover 'global' fan studies; however, they addressed only a few examples of non-Western fandom without exploring transnational fans sufficiently.

As an early endeavor, drawing on a literature review of the overseas fandom of American soap operas, Harrington and Bielby (2005) explored how transcultural media flows affect fans' pleasure and identities. While aptly pointing out that fans 'engage with media texts through the local cultural frames that they bring to viewing, listening, or seeing' (Harrington and Bielby, 2005: 837), the authors proposed several factors related to the transcultural flows of media that influence fandom: the cross-cultural reputation of the media text that is the object of fandom, the temporal and geographic gaps between the media text and its receiving ends, and the ownership and distribution structures of content providers (i.e., global media corporations). While this early discussion of transcultural pop culture fandom offered insights into understanding media fandom in the broadcast era, the findings already seem outdated and, thus, call for revisions drawing on further empirical studies of transnational fandom in the new media era. In particular, pop culture fans have increasingly engaged with networked fan practices; thus, the geographic, cultural, and temporal gaps between the media text and the fan have been reduced significantly. Meanwhile, the role of broadcast media has decreased, while social media and participatory culture have allowed fans to access transnational media texts without gatekeepers. Given the rapidly changing media environment, it is noteworthy that fans' experiences with spatial and temporal distance from their fan objects are being redefined. The cultural proximity between fans and fan objects may be negotiated through their everyday social media use, and fan practices may increasingly extend beyond the boundaries of geo-cultural blocks.

In fan studies that have insufficiently examined the global dimensions of fan activities, research on Japanese media has provided insights that can be considered in the effort to understand recent K-pop fandom in the West. In particular, the studies examining young American fans of Japanese animation (Allison, 2006; Napier, 2007; Newitz, 1994) have analyzed how Japanese pop culture allows Westerners to reimagine their own society and culture (Newitz, 1994) and, furthermore, to challenge American hegemony in the global media culture (Allison, 2006). In examining how and why Japanese pop culture products are consumed among Western (primarily American) fans and audiences, these studies illustrate that fans relate the otherness implicated in transnational cultural products to their everyday contexts while creatively appropriating the otherness of Japanese pop culture. According to these studies, the ‘strangeness of an alternative (non-American) fantasy world’ offered by Japanese pop culture is an attraction for some American fans (Allison, 2006: 17), while other American fans are attracted to not only the difference or strangeness of the foreign pop culture but also to its similarities with American pop culture in terms of genre and narratives (Newitz, 1994). Media researchers have debated how to evaluate Western fans’ consumption of difference and otherness in non-Western culture. The aforementioned studies on the Western fandom of Japanese pop culture have explored the subversive or counter-hegemonic meanings of fan practices (Allison, 2006), while being cautious about the potential reproduction of Orientalism in Western fandom of Japanese cultural content (Hills, 2002; Napier, 2007; Newitz, 1994).

Overall, transnational fan practices have been considered a way for fans to feel empowered and imagine possible lives through media texts, which are distant and different from those produced in their own local contexts (Allison, 2006; Han, 2017; Napier, 2007; Shim and Noh, 2012). This interpretation may resonate with the findings of numerous other fan studies and especially with the view that has been dominant in the cultural studies of fandom since the emergence of the ‘first wave’ of fan studies, primarily inspired by Fiske’s (1992) thesis on the cultural economy of fandom. In this discourse, fans were defined as subjects engaging in symbolic and textual production. However, this notion of fandom as resistance has increasingly been criticized for its lack of empirical evidence; as Sandvoss (2005) pointed out, it may be a rather normative definition that draws on a narrow assumption about fandom without empirically describing what fandom does and who fans are. Fiske’s model of fandom remains influential; thus, young pop culture fans tend to be conceptualized as a group of creative activists (Duffett, 2014). However, it may be important to pay due attention to the constraints, complexities, and creative possibilities in transnational fan practices. Whereas the new media has contributed to facilitating transnational cultural flows, which allow local audiences to reflect on their own social systems (Kim, 2013), fans’ engagement with transnational media may be subject to structural forces, such as the way in which the otherness of transnational texts is socially constructed. In this regard, an examination of how Western fans encounter the difference and otherness of K-pop would

offer insights into the contradictory processes of transnational fan practices as possibilities and/or constraints.

## **Research context and methods**

To examine how young Canadians become, and feel about being, K-pop fans, self-declared K-pop fans in Vancouver were interviewed. Vancouver has been recognized as one of the major K-pop fan-populated Canadian cities. When the city was featured in the K-pop girl band TWICE's music video *Likey* in 2017, the Canadian news media excitedly described Vancouver as an emerging K-pop fan-base (Nair, 2017). Indeed, Vancouver locations where the *Likey* video was shot—such as downtown's 'Alley-Oop' block—have recently become K-pop fan pilgrimage sites.

The influx of K-pop and the formation of its fandom in Canada provide an intriguing case study. In particular, it is useful to compare Canada with its southern neighbor, the US, which has been the largest overseas fan base of K-pop outside Asia in terms of the number of tour concerts and participants (Benjamin, 2016). Despite its geographical and linguistic proximity to the US, Canada may represent a unique position in regard to K-pop's global flows. Although Canada has been one of the most multiethnic countries in the Global North, the Canadian mediascape has been reliant on Western content. According to the latest census data (in 2011), immigrants represent 20.6% of the total population of Canada; this is the highest proportion among the so-called G8, which represents the most affluent countries in the Global North (Statistics Canada, 2016). However, the Canadian media industries' global scope in terms of media content import/export has been focused predominantly on the US and Europe (Ontario Media Development Corporation, 2017). Moreover, Canada's mediascape has not seemed to be free of the White-dominant racial frame (Fleras, 2014). The contradictory coexistence of the multiethnic population and White-dominant media environments may provide an interesting context for understanding K-pop and its fans in the West.

For this project, the participants, who are identified by their pseudonyms in this article, were recruited in Vancouver in 2016 and 2017 via advertisements and snowballing. The data analyzed and presented in this article include individual interviews with 18 young people aged between 18 and 28 years. Canadian fans of Korean descent were excluded in the research, as they might represent a unique demographic who consume K-pop as a cultural form of their ancestral homeland rather than as a form of global media content. The interviewees were primarily Canadians of East Asian descent ( $n=9$ ) and White Canadians ( $n=8$ ), with the exception of one Canadian of mixed race (Black and White). While male and female participants were sought, most respondents were women, with the exception of two males. Given the nature of the research process (qualitative, semi-structured interviews that lasted for 45 to 70 minutes), sampling processes, and sample size, the findings may not be generalizable to Canada-wide K-pop fans. However, this study offers a micro-level examination of how K-pop fans think and

feel about their fan identity in the particular contexts of Vancouver. The main focus of the interviews was to explore how different young fans narrate their understanding and negotiation of the cultural differences in regard to K-pop. Furthermore, the participants were asked to discuss how they became interested in K-pop and how they felt about being K-pop fans, especially in relation to ‘others’ (other fans and non-fans).

## Encountering K-pop

Becoming fans of a transnational pop culture text or star involves a process in which the initial distance between the fan and the fan object is negotiated (Sandvoss, 2005). In particular, K-pop involves evident linguistic, geographic, and cultural barriers when it inflows into Western contexts. The fans in this study initially had to negotiate the barriers. However, they quickly alleviated the barriers by engaging with fan translations and K-pop’s hybrid features. In so doing, affective connections between the fan and the fan object were established, while the cultural difference implicated in K-pop as foreign content was transcended.

The increasing availability of K-pop on social media was a particularly significant factor allowing the fans to freely access K-pop. The K-pop fans in this study tended to be exposed to K-pop via their friends and/or social media. K-pop music videos, circulated and linked through social media, ‘hooked’ the fans. The technological architecture of social media allowed the young people to navigate across different genres of music, video, and shows. Thus, rather than consuming exclusively K-pop content, most fans in the study were omnivorously exposed to different forms of pop cultural content, including American pop music, anime, J-pop (Japanese pop music), and Chinese pop music. Cora, a 28-year-old fan, commented,

I have noticed that a lot of people are interested in anime or manga and then stumble across K-pop somehow through either YouTube recommendation algorithm or a friend who says, ‘Oh, you like Asian stuff. There’s a different kind of Asian stuff’.

The young fans’ social media-assisted cultural consumption alleviates the language barrier of K-pop by facilitating fan-based translation networks. The fans in the study were comfortable with subtitle viewing partly due to their previous online experiences with other non-English media forms, such as anime, and engagement with fan-subbing culture. ‘I grew up watching anime, so I watch Japanese stuff all the time with subtitles, so it wasn’t, it wasn’t too weird [to read subtitles in K-pop music video]’, said Howard, a 24-year-old fan. The language-driven textual distance provides a space in which overseas K-pop fans are connected to and explore fan communities through sharing translations and discussing different interpretations. In the recent global circulation of Korean pop culture, fan-supported translations and fans’ reaction videos have emerged as common fan activities (Dwyer, 2012; Fuhr, 2016; Oh, 2017).

The language barrier paradoxically facilitates overseas K-pop fans' investment in translation and interpretation of the original texts, using social media, and thus, allows them to participate in K-pop fan culture. Even if fan-subtitles are not available, K-pop is affectively integrated into its overseas fans' everyday lives; the fans become immersed in the tones, rhythms, and feelings of K-pop projected in music videos without interruption by the lyrics. Cora, who is a long-time K-pop fan, pointed out: 'Music can transcend language. Even though I wasn't necessarily understanding the lyrics, I could understand the music and what it was and what they were trying to say'. The language barrier may allow overseas fans to interpret the K-pop text differently and, thus, increase the degree of polysemy—that is, the multiplicity of interpretation.

K-pop's polysemic nature is further enhanced by its hybrid style, which allows non-Korean fans to engage with it, even without having linguistic, cultural, or genre-specific knowledge. The fans in this study seemed to enjoy K-pop as a genre that is simultaneously familiar and different. Howard, the aforementioned White fan who became enthusiastic about K-pop relatively recently (1 year ago), described it as music that 'takes stuff from our music and makes it better or catchier'. Similarly, Cindy, a 21-year-old fan of Chinese heritage, noted, 'It's like a mix of Western and Asian elements. So, it feels very familiar to me'. The K-pop industry and its producers have emphasized the importance of Western pop music components and hybridization for K-pop's global circulation. Major K-pop companies have produced internationally appealing music products through the global division of labor—active recruiting of, and collaboration with, international composers, producers, and choreographers while assembling these components into idol music packages (Fuhr, 2016).

K-pop's musical styles were often perceived by the Canadian fans as a newer version of pop music, rather than as completely different, 'exotic' music. According to the fans in this study, K-pop replicates yet advances American pop genres through high-quality music videos and performances. K-pop idols were often described as far more sophisticated performers than their Western counterparts, who might repeat their conventional music and performance styles. Maya, an 18-year-old fan who was also an amateur dancer, emphasized that K-pop performers were advanced in comparison to their American counterparts: 'K-pop idols are trained to be the performers. They are trained to do the best and to appeal to the audience. (...) Some American ones are just... oh, their stage is so boring'. Similarly, Thelma, a 19-year-old fan, noted that K-pop idols 'are not scared to do different things', while 'Western artists seem to stay with more of the same sort of thing'. For some respondents, it was apparent that K-pop was the newest alternative to Western pop music.

As discussed in this section, the fans initially encountered K-pop's linguistic and cultural distance. The role of social media, as well as textual hybridity of K-pop, was significant in the overseas fans' translation and overcoming of the distance inscribed in K-pop. However, social media alone does not explain why overseas fans invest in overcoming the textual distance of this transnational cultural form.

The fans' investment in K-pop might be triggered and reinforced by the affect or sensibility generated in particular cultural *contexts* in which they were situated. As recent studies of transnational K-pop fandom in Latin America (Han, 2017) and Canada (Yoon, 2017) have revealed, overseas K-pop fans affectively identify with K-pop and its idols in negotiating their particular subject positions in terms of class, gender, or race. As Grossberg (1992: 56) claimed, fans' affect is not a subjective experience, but rather a 'socially constructed domain of cultural effects'. In this regard, the Canadian fans' affective connections with K-pop in this study may be influenced by their social positions and contexts. Thus, for better understanding the meaning of becoming K-pop fans in Vancouver, the next sections examine how the fans and their cultural tastes are socially positioned and how they negotiate such positioning.

### **Stereotyping K-pop and its fandom**

The fans are positioned in relation to the socially constructed meanings of K-pop in Canada while participating in an affectively connected fan world. In this regard, drawing on the fans' narratives and experiences, this section addresses how K-pop and its fandom are stereotyped by non-fans.

The fans in this study often encountered stereotypical responses from their peers, who considered K-pop to be music that is popular among young, immature, and/or Asia-fetishizing audiences only. For example, Florence, a 21-year-old fan of Chinese heritage, described how other people responded to her interest in K-pop:

Some people are like, 'OH, REALLY?' [in a derogatory tone] because it [K-pop] seems to be something a little bit, I guess, immature? Because the average [K-pop] fan is a high school girl, people say, 'Oh, really? You're a little bit too old' [laughs].

Similarly, Bella, a 22-year-old fan of Chinese heritage, recalled her peers' negative comments:

When I started liking K-pop in Grade 8, it was just me [who liked K-pop among my peers]. Whenever people would look at the music on my iPod [laughs], they would be like, 'Oh, what's that? Are they your Asian songs?' So, yeah, it wasn't accepted. Still now, I would be hesitant to say to someone else, 'Oh, I like to listen to [K-pop]'.

Those who looked down on her cultural taste for Asian pop music and K-pop were not only White but also included her Asian Canadian peers.

Fans of a non-Asian background—White Canadians in particular—were also aware of how others might think about them. Several White fans recalled that their families and peers tended to consider K-pop as incomprehensible foreign music and, thus, did not understand their dedication to K-pop. While attempting to explain K-pop to their family and peers, these White fans were concerned about the public perception of White K-pop fans as fetishizing Asian culture and Asians.



Sometimes, they encountered online trolls who made disrespectful or hostile comments about K-pop fans on social media. Cora, who is a White fan, noted, 'I would get random comments from strangers or people who kind of knew me, like 'Oh, you're so Asian', 'You like Asian guys', or whatever. (...) I was hearing (such comments) mostly from White people'. Thelma, another White fan, expressed her concerns about the stereotyping of White K-pop fans by non-fans or fans of Asian backgrounds:

I feel like they're going to think I'm weird or I'm messed up... There's a big thing about fetishizing Asian cultures (...) If I'm listening to the music [i.e., K-pop] and if I'm around a group of people, I turn it down, especially if they're Korean or something, because I don't want to feel like they think I'm fetishizing them or something. I just turn it down, or I change it to Post Malone or something (...) It's such an awkward thing to talk about.

She also recalled how she felt at a Vancouver K-pop fan group gathering, which comprised predominantly Asian fans:

I went to a K-pop club, and I felt really awkward [at first]... there were two White people [i.e., Thelma and her friend]. I was with my friend, but still, I just felt like, 'Do they think I'm weird or something?' (...) Everyone was really nice when I was chatting, but I felt they were thinking I was weird like those you watch in Koreaboo compilations [on YouTube], who are crazy.

As Thelma noted, several White fans in the study were initially concerned about the public perception of White K-pop fans as extreme fans who were fetishizing Korea; such fans are referred to among K-pop fans as 'Koreaboos'. According to the respondents, Koreaboos are obsessively and exclusively enthusiastic about Korean pop culture without necessarily maintaining a connection with the external world and other K-pop fans. For example, some overseas K-pop fan bloggers and YouTubers who call themselves Koreaboos have excessively posted and shared Korean pop cultural content. Being aware of the negative images of extreme fans, several respondents distinguished themselves from Koreaboos.

Given that media fans have often been represented as subordinate groups (Fiske, 1992; Hills, 2002; Sandvoss, 2005), the marginalization of K-pop fandom in Canada may not be unique. However, when positioned in the Western context in particular, K-pop fandom appears to be doubly marginalized—by not only its pop cultural tastes (in opposition to more legitimate, high cultural tastes) but also its racial implications. This tendency toward the double marginalization of K-pop fandom was identified in previous studies on overseas K-pop fans (Mazaná, 2014; Yoon, 2017). For example, Mazaná (2014) found that K-pop fans in the Czech Republic were concerned about racist reactions to their cultural tastes for K-pop and its activities due to pervasive racism. Similarly, the Canadian fans in the study were not free of the pervasive racial stereotyping of K-pop and its fandom

among their (non-fan) peers and even within their families. In particular, K-pop fans of color may be stereotyped similarly to other racialized media fans, who are often represented as individuals who are ‘incapable of being normalized’ (Stanfill, 2011). In comparison, White K-pop fans seem to be stereotyped as fetishists obsessed with Asian culture. Due to this stereotyping, some respondents were initially hesitant about ‘coming out’ as K-pop fans.

### **Fans’ negotiation of otherness**

While some fans were initially reluctant to identify them as K-pop fans in public due to stereotyping, it does not mean the fans comply with the dominant cultural order that reproduces particular images of K-pop and its fandom. Most fans in the study questioned or challenged the pervasive stereotyping. In particular, the fans’ engagement with K-pop and responses to the racial stereotyping of K-pop appeared to be influenced by their own subject positions in terms of race and ethnicity. Some fans of Asian descent engaged with K-pop in relation to their Asian Canadian subject positions, while White Canadian fans emphasized their individual and alternative cultural tastes that do not belong to mainstream culture.

For some Asian Canadian fans, K-pop seemed integrated into the cultural repertoire of Asian pop cultural genres, through which they can positively explore their Asian diasporic connections. By engaging with K-pop, the diasporic Asian youth might reimagine their racial and ethnic positions in Canada, where dominant Whiteness is often deceptively concealed under the banner of ‘cultural mosaic’ or multiculturalism (Kallen, 2003). The popular cultural imagination of diasporic Asia and its culture, especially via media platforms, may be renegotiation of racialization ‘from below’ (Parker and Song, 2006). By being K-pop fans, some Asian Canadian respondents realized the White-dominant nature of Canada’s media environment and, thus, further engaged with their Asian roots. Cindy did not previously care about the lack of Asian presence in Canadian mainstream media but became keenly aware of her Asian roots through K-pop:

It’s pretty strange, because right before I got into EXO, I was in a Western TV show fandom, and it had nothing to do with anything Asian. And there were no Asian characters in that show, and I got along OK with the fandom and people in it. When I found K-pop, when I found these really interesting people, it felt like a connection, like [it was] a clique that was missing for a long time.

In this manner, for several fans of Asian heritage, Asian aspects of K-pop seemed to play a significant role in the positive affirmation of their Asian Canadian identities.

In comparison, several White K-pop fans described their interest in and enthusiasm for K-pop as their individual cultural preference. Their narratives appear to be similar with the liberal discourse of multiculturalism, which is pervasive in Canada, as they see their affective connections with K-pop as a cultural choice

of individuals, rather than as an effect of a particular social context. Through engaging with K-pop, White fans seemed to seek alternative cultural resources to consume. The White fans found K-pop interesting as it provides an alternative cultural choice that is different from their White-dominant peer culture. By participating in this emerging cultural form, they looked for what they felt lacking in mainstream culture—Western pop music in particular.

While considering K-pop as a multicultural choice, Anita, a 20-year-old White fan, did not consider the racial stereotyping of K-pop in Canada as a form of racism, as she ‘haven’t really felt it like...racism’. Anita’s response, to some extent, resonate with Oh’s (2017: 2277) study of White YouTubers’ K-pop reaction videos, in which White fans ‘almost never discuss their own racial identities’ and therefore ‘reify colorblindness’. However, it seems difficult to conclude that White fans in the present study internalized or reproduced colorblind or post-racial ideology, which Oh (2017) found in White YouTuber fans’ reaction to K-pop. Most fans in the present study, whether Asian or White, were aware of, or challenge, the pervasive racialization of K-pop and its fans, although they did not necessarily explore the issue of structural racism in an articulate language. Some criticized racist individuals who looked down on K-pop and its fans, while others—several Asian fans in particular—mentioned the structure of racial inequality of Canadian society in their discussion about the racialization of K-pop. Interestingly, White fans in the present study were also critical of White K-pop YouTubers, some of whom are called ‘Koreaboos’, for their fetishizing and stereotyping Korean culture. In so doing, they attempted to avoid being considered Western fans fetishizing the other.

As discussed in this section, being K-pop fans enables the young Canadians to realize their subject positions—especially among Asian Canadians—and explore their subcultural tastes. The K-pop fans in the study seemed to explore their enthusiasm for K-pop partly as a way of negotiating their subject positions and/or pop cultural tastes different from those of their (non-K-pop fan) peers who engaged deeply in mainstream pop music—Western pop music.<sup>1</sup>

### **Subculture of growing up together**

The fans’ negotiation of the otherness of K-pop and its fandom, constructed in the dominant social order, was not free of their own subject positions (e.g., racial and ethnic backgrounds). By responding to the ongoing stereotyping of K-pop, the fans might explore their fan identity and a sense of belonging. As previous studies suggested, media fans of any type can be provided with moments in which to realize their subject positions and, furthermore, to experience personal/collective growth (Napier, 2007; Sandvoss, 2005). Of course, being a fan does not necessarily involve a full transformation of one’s identity. As Duffett (2013: 155) points out, individuals who become fans ‘find that a new vista opens up of self-identified possibilities’, thereby changing ‘*how they see their identity*. [Italics in original]’ Moreover, being fans may enable the individuals to ‘invest in new forms of meaning, pleasure and

identity in order to cope with new forms of pain, pessimism, frustration, alienation, terror and boredom' (Grossberg, 1992: 65).

Feelings of being outside the dominant peer culture, which led some respondents to K-pop, appeared to facilitate subcultural practices among the fans. By participating in fan networks online and offline, the respondents shared affective connections with their idols and other fans. In so doing, such fans seemed to accumulate their own subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995), which is distinguished from the symbolic value of mainstream cultural forms. The networked participation in K-pop fandom was interestingly described by the fans as 'growing up together' (with K-pop idols and other fans). Several fans, who had been dedicated to K-pop for a relatively long period, commented on how they had grown up alongside their favorite idols. For example, Anita, the aforementioned 20-year-old White fan who became enthusiastic about K-pop 5 years ago, expressed her feeling of growing up with her favorite group, BTS, when she commented on the band's debut performance at the American Music Awards ceremony in 2017, which was described at the beginning of this article.

[When I saw BTS performing at the American Music Awards,] I was really proud, actually. I felt like a proud mom watching my kid go and graduate high school or something. Because I've been listening to them for such a long time and then seeing the recognition that they deserve and having a bunch of other people get exposed to them, I'm really grateful.

Anita's personal history as a K-pop fan overlapped with the history of BTS, which she followed since its debut in 2013. As known by BTS and its global fandom, social media has been an integral component of global K-pop fan culture, in which fans constantly feel connected through their 'micro-participation' in various forms of K-pop activities, from posting a comment to participating in an event. Mundane fan practices, which are potentially rewarded by feedback from other fans and, occasionally, directly from K-pop idols, may enhance the feeling of being close to K-pop idols. Indeed, many respondents described K-pop idols as looking 'real' and feeling 'close', especially in comparison to Western pop stars, who appear 'out of reach'.

K-pop fans experience 'growing up' through various forms of 'micro-participation', which not only facilitate individual fans' practices of enjoying K-pop in everyday contexts but also easily transform individual practices into connected (offline) actions with other fans and may eventually activate 'macro-participation'. For example, Cora, the aforementioned 28-year-old White fan, organized a food drive (food charity) in honor of her favorite K-pop group, VIXX, which was coming to Vancouver for a show, for 6 days. In so doing, she engaged in a sharing economy and found other K-pop fans whom she could not have met otherwise. She noted, 'At first, I thought maybe I was the only fan in the area or all the fans were just scattered across the US or whatever, but yay for actively going out and finding the community!'

For a few fans, growing up together also implied keeping their idols healthy and happy. For these long-term fans, who grew up with their K-pop idols and other fans, being fans was more than following the idols and sharing memories with other fans. Rather, it involved a critical understanding of commodifying forces that may restrict idol–fan relations and the freedom of idols. In particular, while appreciating the lively and friendly attributes of K-pop idols, these fans also questioned the entertainment companies’ treatment and commodification of their idols. For example, Cindy, the aforementioned 21-year-old undergraduate and long-term K-pop fan, began to question the driving forces of K-pop idols’ friendly self-presentations. She was very dedicated to K-pop in terms of her ‘emotional side’, but her ‘rational side’ began to question its contradictory aspects.

There are so many things [about K-pop idols] that are premeditated [although they look natural]. So many things are planned, and you can never tell what’s natural, what’s real, and what’s an image that a company is trying to portray. And I’m just really critical of all the things that I see and I’m attracted to. (...) I don’t want to fall prey to that. I mean it’s fine... it’s fine, but I just want to be aware of it while I’m participating in these activities.

As Cindy pointed out, the friendly images represented by K-pop idols may not necessarily coincide with what they go through during their training at the K-pop companies. A few long-term fans appeared to vacillate between suspicion about the system and their personal emotional ties with the idols. ‘They [the idols] are being forced to grow up in a way that, I feel, they really shouldn’t have to’, lamented Jamie, a highly dedicated 23-year-old fan who lived in Korea for 1 year to learn Korean. Because of her concern and love for idols, Jamie hoped to launch her own business, in which she could ‘introduce an alternate way of becoming a musician and making music and art’ for K-pop idol candidates in the future.

Of course, the Vancouver-based K-pop fans’ sense of growing up together does not mean that all fans of different cultural backgrounds are integrated into one family-like community without any tensions. As discussed in an earlier section, fans may be situated in different subject positions and thus may have different responses to the stereotyping of K-pop and its fandom. However, the fans seemed to seek affective connections with other local K-pop fans across differences and share a sense of growing up together. For example, while lamenting about the lack of K-pop resources available in Vancouver and thus sometimes made trips to American cities to attend K-pop tour concerts, the fans in the study shared their experiences with other local K-pop fans in Vancouver, and in so doing, participated in the networked space of K-pop fandom locally as well as globally. Jaimie, the aforementioned fan of a mixed-race background, described the K-pop community that she experienced and desired: ‘K-pop is something that really brings people together. No matter what language barriers [you have], [it] doesn’t matter, racial backgrounds, doesn’t matter’. In this manner, the fans in the study often expressed their desire to be connected with other fans.

## Conclusion

This study explored Vancouver-based K-pop fans' narratives about the process of becoming and being K-pop fans. After being introduced to K-pop through social media and/or friends, the young people negotiated the cultural and geographic distance of the foreign content through fan translation networks and by engaging with K-pop's hybrid styles. Being K-pop fans involved the process of responding to socially constructed meanings of K-pop. In coping with the stereotyping of K-pop and seeking a sense of belonging, the young people gained a sense of growing up with K-pop. According to the respondents' accounts, despite the significant number of Asian descendants in the area, K-pop in Vancouver seems to remain a subcultural form and its impact on the mainstream media environment remains uncertain. However, while K-pop fans' activities and tastes may be marginalized by the public, these fans explored the subcultural meanings of their fan tastes/activities through social media-driven 'micro participation' and distinguished themselves from others. In so doing, the fans sought to acquire and accumulate particular pop cultural or subcultural capital, which affirmed their fan identity and enabled them to feel empowered (Thornton, 1995).

What does it mean for these young Canadians to transnationally explore and engage with pop music of a non-Western origin and identify with its fan worlds? Fan audiences' engagement with transnational cultural forms can be seen as a potential challenge to the existing cultural order. For example, as Kim (2013) suggests, K-pop as a transnational media form may prompt audiences to critically reflect on their own social contexts while offering new modes of imagination. K-pop fandom in Vancouver can be seen as young Canadians' pursuit of alternative cultural forms to the American or, more broadly, Western hegemony of pop culture by engaging with the global circulation of non-Western cultural products. For the fans in the present study, K-pop appeared to be a new genre that allows them to detour dominant American music. The fans engaged with K-pop as a new possible cultural resource, in which they can participate. It was compared with the dominant American pop music, which was considered a more conventional and closed text. K-pop fans in Vancouver have been growing up with K-pop and, in so doing, generating a subcultural network that explores a social media-driven, new cultural sensibility and facilitates micro and macro modes of participation.

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## Note

1. The fans did not consider Canadian pop music as a particularly engaging cultural resource in comparison to the dominant American pop music. Most respondents did not see Canadian pop music as an influential pop culture genre that played a significant role in their adolescent memories on a personal level and in the imagination of Canada as an imagined community on a social level. Most K-pop fans in the study, including those who kept following American pop music trends, were indifferent to Canadian pop music. When asked to compare Canadian pop music with K-pop, most respondents were not certain about what Canadian pop music was. From the respondents' points of view, Canadian pop musicians always 'get shipped to America' (Lilla, 18 years old), as Canadian talents move to America and become successful as part of the American pop music scene. As many respondents pointed out, successful Canadian pop musicians, such as Justin Bieber and Drake, tend to be branded by, and become integrated into, the American music industry. Kierra, an 18-year-old fan, stated, 'A lot of [America-based] artists are actually from Canada. A lot of people don't even know they're Canadian because they're always active in the American market'. For the young Canadians in the study, Canadian pop music was considered as part of American and Western music. While the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission has set Canadian music content requirements for decades in the Canadian broadcast media (35% of music in commercial radio stations' programs and 50% of music in public radio stations' programs) (Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commission, 2002), the Canadian content rules do not apply to music played on different social media platforms, preferred by new generation consumers, such as K-pop fans in this study. In this regard, it may not be surprising that young Canadians in the present study did not particularly consider Canadian pop music as the 'soundtrack' of their childhood and adolescence.

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