Cultural Translation of K-Pop Among Asian Canadian Fans

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Drawing on qualitative interview data, this study examines the cultural translation of K-pop in Canada. By focusing on Canadian youth of Asian descent, who are relatively marginalized in the dominant Canadian mediascape yet considered a main segment of K-pop fandom in Canada, the study closely examines how racial and affective affinities of K-pop are translated and negotiated by young fans. In the study, young Asian Canadian fans challenged the racial stereotyping of K-pop as the other of dominant Western pop culture by positively redefining racial meanings attached to K-pop. Meanwhile, they affectively identified with K-pop idols via the extensive use of social media, and thus internalize a particular mode of subjectivity through which individuals willingly seek the model of a self-developing, entrepreneurial self.

Keywords: K-pop, idols, Asian Canadian youth, cultural affinity, race, neoliberal affect, social media, transcultural fandom

The transnational fandom of K-pop indicates the increasing significance of cultural translation in global media consumption. In particular, due to the geocultural distance between K-pop produced in South Korea (Korea, hereafter) and its globally dispersed audiences, the global consumption of K-pop inevitably requires the process of active translation—not only literal translation from above (e.g., by gatekeepers) but also translation of cultural and emotional elements of K-pop from below (e.g., by fan audiences). Through different processes of translation, fans can explore particular affinities and ties with the transnational fan objects that they consume. In so doing, K-pop can be meaningfully integrated into fans' daily lives and thus contribute to expressing and exploring their identities. Unless it is meaningfully translated, K-pop would neither be enthusiastically received by its fans nor contribute to fans' identity work. However, despite a recent increase in media studies of K-pop beyond Asia, relatively little research has examined the grassroots cultural translation of K-pop, through which global fans explore cultural affinities with K-pop and its idols.

To examine K-pop's cultural translation among transnational audiences, this study draws on qualitative interview data collected from K-pop fans in Canada. Given Canada's cultural and ethnic complexities, this study suggests that the reception of K-pop among Canada-based fans should be

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examined as a *transcultural* process rather than as a cross-national phenomenon. Since 20.6% of the total population is foreign born and 17.5% of the total population uses at least two languages in their households (Statistics Canada, 2016), Canada's national mediascape is highly fragmented. Indeed, the Canadian national media has been considered a particularly elusive domain due to the country's historical context as a "contested space" affected by "the apparitional others of US dominance, First Nations claims, Quebec separatism, and 'foreign' immigration" (Bociurkiw, 2011, p. 2). Thus, for diasporic populations and people of color, who are categorically referred to as "visible minorities"[2] in Canadian media and policy discourses, ethnoracial aspects of cultural consumption might be a more significant component than a Canadian national cultural identity in the reception of non-Canadian-produced texts.

Given this context, this study examines the cultural translation of K-pop among Canada-based fan audiences of East Asian, Southeast Asian, and South Asian backgrounds. By focusing on Canadian audiences of Asian descent, who are relatively marginalized in the dominant Canadian mediascape yet considered a main segment of K-pop fandom in Canada (Yoon & Jin, 2016), the study closely examines racial and affective affinities in transcultural consumption of K-pop. The study addresses how K-pop is reappropriated by young people of color as a means of negotiating their identity positions in Canada. Because young people's engagement with pop music can be seen as an activity of "answering questions of identity" to create "a particular sort of self-definition, a particular place in society" (Frith, 1987, p. 140), the present study reveals how racialized youth negotiate and express their identities through translating and consuming K-pop as a new breed of pop music in the Canadian context. The study also explores how Asian Canadian fans' cultural affinities with K-pop may not be free from neoliberal forces exercised through a particular mode of affect.

Understanding Transcultural Affinity

The overseas flow of K-pop has been identified as an intra-Asian phenomenon and more recently as a global process. By and large, K-pop's global rise has been ascribed to its textual and contextual attributes. While hybrid music styles and dynamic choreographies have often been identified as K-pop's unique *textual* attributes (Lee & Kuwahara, 2014; Lie & Oh, 2014), the talent training and management system—referred to as the "idol system"—and effective distribution via YouTube are identified as *contextual* elements contributing to K-pop's global rise (Jin, 2016; J. O. Kim, 2016; Y. Kim, 2011; Lie & Oh, 2014). However, despite ongoing debates about factors that might affect the rise of K-pop on a global scale, English language research focusing solely on global K-pop fans beyond intra-Asian regions and their experiences has been scarce until recently. In contrast to the flourishing of studies of the "Korean Wave" (the global flows of Korean pop culture), in-depth research of the lived culture of K-pop fans beyond Asia is still nascent. In particular, studies are required to effectively examine how K-pop is translated by its global fan audiences from below.

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[2] In Canadian policy documents, the term *visible minorities* refers to people who consider themselves neither White nor aboriginal. As of 2011, visible minorities represent 19.1% of Canada's national population (Statistics Canada, 2016).

Despite the lack of in-depth studies on K-pop reception beyond Asia, several recent publications have provided invaluable data from different geocultural contexts beyond Asia–Europe (Marinescu & Balica, 2013; Sung, 2013, 2014), Latin America (Choi, 2015; Madrid-Morales & Lovric, 2015), the Middle East (Otmazgin & Lyan, 2014), and the United States (E. Y. Jung, 2010). Due to the short history of global K-pop fan research, these studies tend to examine general tendencies of K-pop consumption on its receiving end by identifying K-pop's appealing factors. Thus, the research has insufficiently explored global fans' cultural affinities with K-pop, which are negotiated in the process of cultural translation from below.

Although geocultural proximity was often identified as an important driving force behind the rapid flows of Korean pop music and TV dramas within Asia in the 2000s, proximity or affinity has not been considered as a contributing factor to the recent global circulation of K-pop beyond Asia (S. Jung, 2013). Indeed, K-pop increasingly spreads beyond its geocultural market of Asia and reaches out to a wide range of dispersed audiences who are geographically distant from Korea and thus might not necessarily have Asia-based fans' cultural and historical experiences. However, a certain level of cultural affinity between the transcultural text of K-pop and its global audiences may still be an integral component of transcultural fan practices (Chin & Morimoto, 2013). That is, fans translate transcultural texts and appropriate them as the familiar content relatable to their everyday lives. Moreover, it is not always true that global K-pop fans residing outside the geographic boundary of Asia are unfamiliar with "Asian sensibilities" (Cho, 2011); young people of Asian heritage in the West, who are considered a key consumer group of K-pop in its global market (E. Y. Jung, 2009; Yoon & Jin, 2016), may share an affinity with Asian diasporas (Kibria, 2003). Furthermore, non-Asian ethnic K-pop fans tend to be exposed to other Asian pop culture (e.g., J-pop [Japanese pop]) prior to their introduction to K-pop (Choi, 2015).

For a better understanding of transcultural affinities between fan audiences and their fan objects flowing from other cultural contexts, two perspectives in media studies can provide some insight: the *cultural proximity thesis*, which has been an influential framework over the past two decades, and its latest application to fan studies, *transcultural fandom studies*.

The cultural proximity thesis has explained the transnational popularity of particular narrative media texts in a cultural and/or linguistic regional boundary, such as trendy Japanese TV dramas in Asia (Iwabuchi, 2002) and telenovelas in Latin America (Straubhaar, 1991, 2014). This perspective has suggested that audiences tend to prefer media content that is culturally and/or linguistically proximal (Straubhaar, 1991; for recent empirical applications, see Davis, Straubhaar, & Ferin Cunha, 2016; Straubhaar, 2014). The thesis, sometimes in combination with a more historical analysis that examines temporal similarities in non-Western countries' process of modernization (e.g., Iwabuchi, 2002), has increasingly been used as a theoretical framework for understanding transnational media flows, especially in non-Western regions. However, the cultural proximity thesis and its more recent applications (Iwabuchi, 2002; Straubhaar, 2014) need further revisions for several reasons. Above all, the thesis tends to focus on intraregional flows of media through the lens of the *national*, and thus nation, state, and society are considered as "the natural social and political form of the modern world" (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002, p. 302). In addition, the increasing role of social media in the diffusion and consumption of media content is not sufficiently addressed in the cultural proximity thesis and its recent applications. Thus, there has been a lack of studies on how social media contributes to facilitating cultural translation and cultural

affinities between media users and media content in transnational contexts. Furthermore, the cultural proximity thesis has focused more on cultural values conveyed through narrative-based media forms (e.g., TV and movies) without sufficiently considering affective dimensions, which can be a significant component in the transnational flows of less narrative-based genres, such as pop music.

The recently suggested framework of transcultural fandom studies provides a more nuanced understanding of cultural affinities between audiences and content flowing from a different cultural context (Annett, 2011; Chin & Morimoto, 2013; S. Jung, 2011). Critically engaging with the notion of "cultural homology" between a particular subculture's value and its style (Hall & Jefferson, 1976) and its recent application to fan studies (Hills, 2002), Chin and Morimoto (2013) explore cultural and emotional affinities between fans and the transnational objects they consume. In particular, by updating recent cultural proximity analysis (Iwabuchi, 2002) and active audience studies (e.g., Fiske, 1992), Chin and Morimoto (2013) suggest that fans appropriate the cultural objects of other cultures "through the means they have at their disposal within their own popular cultural contexts" (p. 103). However, despite its contribution to exploring emotional and local dimensions of media flows, transcultural fandom studies have not yet provided sufficient empirical evidence for interactive processes of affinity formation in media consumption. In particular, they have not examined the complex processes through which fans negotiate the cultural and linguistic barriers of media texts from other cultures. Thus, additional studies are required for a critical understanding of power relations that might facilitate or restrict particular cultural affinities between media users and the transcultural media content that they consume.

This study critically examines cultural affinity between K-pop and its overseas fans as an interactive translation process, which fan audiences experience from below. This research engages with the notion of cultural affinity in media flows as an ongoing and complex process of cultural translation. In particular, this study empirically investigates how two aspects of cultural affinity—racial and affective affinities—are integrated into young people's consumption of K-pop. By focusing on Asian Canadian fans, the study offers insights into understanding how cultural affinities between the cultural text and its transcultural fans emerge in the context of diasporic Asian youth culture, where young people's link to Asia is not necessarily geographically proximal (because they do not live in Asia), but rather is inherited or imagined.

Research Methods

This study analyzes qualitative interview data collected in three Canadian locations—two large, multiethnic cities (metropolitan Toronto and Vancouver areas) and a small, mostly White city (metropolitan Kelowna area). As part of a larger project conducted between May 2015 and October 2016, qualitative interview data of 26 self-claimed K-pop fans were analyzed. Individual semistructured interviews were conducted in English to address the fans' life histories as K-pop fans and their present feelings and thoughts about K-pop and its fan culture. All but one participant were female, and all were between ages 16 and 29 years. Whereas the original project included White and Korean Canadians, the data analyzed for this study include only Canada-based K-pop fans of East Asian, Southeast Asian, or South Asian ethnic backgrounds; Korean Canadians are excluded. Moreover, with the exception of two participants who were in the workforce, the participants were university or high school students.

Whether the participants belonged or did not belong to an established K-pop fan group, most clearly expressed enthusiasm about K-pop. When asked to indicate their dedication to K-pop in a range of 1 (*lowest*) to 10 (*highest*) at the beginning of each interview, most participants chose between 6 and 9; none of them chose 10. Overall, despite their own identification as fans, the participants showed diversity in their fan activities. In particular, several participants were committed to K-pop cover dance groups and regularly uploaded their videos on YouTube. In contrast, other participants tended to show relatively personalized patterns of fan consumption. Several fans in Kelowna, where the presence of K-pop is limited, practiced individualized consumption without "coming out" as K-pop fans.

The interviews allowed the participants to talk about their fan experiences. They were asked about their histories as K-pop fans, fan activities in which they had been involved, and the textual and contextual attributes of K-pop in comparison to other familiar pop music genres. The process of data analysis revealed salient themes in the interviewees' accounts of their engagement with K-pop. Among the identified themes, this article focuses on cultural translation processes through which particular cultural affinities are established between the fans and their fan objects.

Contextualizing and Translating K-pop

As K-pop is a relatively new stream of non-English language music, it has to be transculturally translated into young Asian Canadian fans' local contexts. In this process, fans negotiate the difference and proximity of K-pop and participate in the interactive process of exploring cultural affinities between them and their fan objects. According to recent studies, global fans feel familiar with K-pop's musical components, such as hip-hop beats, while recognizing K-pop's unique aesthetic and performative elements distinguished from Western forms of pop music (Fuhr, 2016; Marinescu & Balica, 2013). In the process of cultural translation, Canada-based fans encounter a lack of resources primarily due to geographic and linguistic barriers. However, those obstacles are strategically negotiated, and thus cultural translation entails particular fan practices of translation and signification of K-pop.

Above all, geographic distance between Canadian fans and K-pop's birthplace is a factor that affects the way fans interact with K-pop idols and other fans. K-pop tour concerts are not regularly held in most Canadian cities (not even in Toronto and Vancouver), as the interviewees lamented. In particular, fans interviewed in Kelowna, a relatively remote area that had never hosted a K-pop tour concert, had to travel to a larger city (e.g., Vancouver, which is located about 400 km away) to attend K-pop tour concerts. "Here is considered more a countryside. I would say. . . . I get frustrated [laughs] by not being able to go to concerts and fan meetings and stuff," noted a 17-year-old high school student in Kelowna (Interviewee 3). She added, "Living in a bigger city would be slightly better, because Big Bang [a K-pop boy band] is coming to Toronto, right? But Canada in general, they don't come here. So, it's mostly America." It is true that most K-pop events in North America have been held in U.S. cities. According to MyMusicTaste.com data, between January 2013 and July 2016, Canada hosted a total of 14 K-pop tour concerts, whereas 102 concerts were held in the United States (Benjamin, 2016). In addition, recent K-pop tour concerts in Canada do not seem to have been always successfully managed. For example, the highly promoted, paid K-pop festival Hallyu North, which was held in Toronto in May 2016, appeared to disappoint the audiences because of its poor management, such as long waiting times, and K-pop

performances that were much shorter than expected (Rumley, 2016). In response to the limited number of K-pop tour concerts and the lack of K-pop infrastructure in Canada, some fans try to hold K-pop concerts in their areas. For example, a 20-year-old female fan in Vancouver (Interviewee 18), along with other members of her K-pop fan club, undertook an online campaign for her favorite K-pop band to schedule a concert in Vancouver. She noted:

> B.A.P [a K-pop boy band] originally said they're only going to Toronto. . . . We [Vancouver-based fans] had to vote [to petition for the band], and then, tried to make Vancouver look like a desirable place for them to come and earn money [laughs]. (Interviewee 18)

Fans negotiate geographic distance by constructing imaginary relationships with their stars via ubiquitous and intimate media platforms (e.g., Twitter) and engaging in constant online enunciations with other fans. Indeed, the role of online fandom and fans' use of social media has been substantial in making K-pop globally spreadable (S. Jung, 2013; Yoon & Jin, 2016).

In addition to geographic distance, linguistic differences may affect how K-pop is received by Canada-based audiences. In response to language barriers, Canada-based K-pop fans in the study tended to explore their own ways of translating and engaging with K-pop texts. According to them, transnational flows of K-pop did not always require literal translation. As a 21-year-old woman of Chinese heritage pointed out, music can be consumed and enjoyed even without understanding lyrics:

> My friend asks me, "Why do you like K-pop so much if you don't understand it?" It's just that I like the song tone, and then "Why not?" It's the same thing as English songs, people who don't know the language, but they still like it. (Interviewee 17)

For K-pop fans in the study, the language barrier was not necessarily a hurdle in accessing and enjoying K-pop. Because the music was received as a highly visualized, performative, playful, and emotional resource, the fans could engage with K-pop even without its literal translation. Of course, there are fans and gatekeepers who translate and produce subtitles as soon as a new song of a popular K-pop group is released. If translated lyrics—either official translations or fan-subs—are not available online, fans sometimes try to translate them on their own by using online tools, such as Google's translator and online dictionaries. Attempts to decipher the meaning of new music videos can facilitate the fan production of YouTube reaction videos, in which non-Korean-speaking audiences try to make sense of the storylines of K-pop videos, as a 20-year-old Chinese Canadian woman noted (Interviewee 16): "Music videos have storylines. And so a lot of people come up with theories. They are trying to figure out what the storylines are when they don't understand lyrics." Indeed, as shown in the flourishing K-pop reaction videos by global audiences on YouTube, the language barrier paradoxically offers overseas fans room to to play with original texts, and thus has formed a unique K-pop fan culture.

Global fans' negotiation of geographic and linguistic barriers in the transcultural consumption of K-pop implies that a cultural form is culturally (rather than literally) translated in its receiving ends. Thus,

for an in-depth understanding of K-pop's transcultural consumption, it is important to examine how particular cultural affinities are established between fans and K-pop.

Consuming Racial Affinity

Despite various probable ways of defining K-pop on a global scale, the *K* in K-pop has often been reduced to a signifier of race or ethnicity, especially in the dominant "White racial frame" of Western media and society (Feagin, 2013). Indeed, K-pop has been introduced to Western media in association with its country of origin, which implies its cultural barriers to Western audiences. K-pop was introduced not simply as a type of music, but along with the exotic media coverage of Korean society, such as its over-the-top beauty industry (e.g., MacKinnon, 2013). Even K-pop star Psy's global hit of "Gangnam Style" was attributed to the pleasure of consuming negative stereotypes of Asian masculinities in Western media discourses (Glynn & Kim, 2013). As a 29-year-old Filipina Canadian woman noted, K-pop tends to be stereotyped by the media and the public as a "foreign" item consumed by "only the kids who also like Japanese animations" (Interviewee 24). In the dominant representation of K-pop as the other of Western pop music, the meaning of K-pop tends to be reduced to inauthentic, niche dance music appealing to particular demographics (Glynn & Kim, 2013).

In response to the racialization of K-pop and its fans, Asian Canadian fans in the study appeared to resignify the racialized representation of K-pop. In the interviewees' accounts, K-pop was not necessarily inauthentic pop music that imitates its Western counterpart, but rather was redefined as quality music created by Asians. When asked to describe K-pop, a 20-year-old Vietnamese Canadian woman (Interviewee 25) defined it as "Crazy Asians with really good music [laughs]. It's colorful and upbeat." For her, K-pop was the newest breed of transnational Asian pop music with which she could easily identify. This new trend might appeal particularly to Asian Canadians, as a 19-year-old woman of Hong Kong descent pointed out: "It's easier for Asians, rather than Whites, to accept the K-pop music, because White people would usually just stay in their comfort zone and just listen to Western pop music" (Interviewee 13). While most interviewees acknowledged that Western pop music had influenced K-pop, they did not necessarily see K-pop as an imitation; rather, they saw it as a unique hybrid that goes beyond Western pop music:

> Those musics are originally from Western countries, right? But I feel like in some parts, K-pop is doing better than the Western [music]. Maybe it's because I am Asian as well, maybe it's because of the lyrics? When I see the lyrics, I feel like it's better describing myself, than Western music. It's a culture thing, I guess. (Interviewee 14, a 20-year-old woman of Hong Kong descent)

Several fans emphasized that K-pop is more creative than American pop music, and thus lamented the K-pop industry's recent effort to incorporate American pop music elements for global audiences. A 20-year-old woman of Vietnamese descent noted:

> I feel like, K-pop now, they're also trying to get American rappers, like Snoop Dogg or Kanye West or someone like that, to be featured into their song. And it's very

unfortunate for the Korean rappers, because they're way better in my opinion. (Interviewee 25)

Meanwhile, K-pop's cultural component, such as visually stunning choreography, seemed to provide its overseas fans with cultural resources for cultural agency (Grossberg, 1992). A 17-year-old Chinese Canadian woman, who was enthusiastically involved in a K-pop cover dance team, recalled how K-pop was a resource for positive self-recognition and even her career goals:

> [Without K-pop] I'd probably still be a nerd [laughs] doing what Asian stereotypes would do . . . like studying at home and just watching animes [laughs]. K-pop started my dance career as well. It also made me want to make videos. So I started making videos [of my K-pop cover dance]. (Interviewee 21)

By engaging with K-pop culture and activities, this interviewee appeared to challenge the dominant stereotypes of Asians and to recognize herself positively. Often, the consumption of K-pop involved Asian Canadian fans recognizing themselves as Asians, not by the dominant discourse, but by their own self-representation. This process of consuming the racial affinity of K-pop might be affected by the way that some interviewees conceptualize their cultural identity. For example, a 17-year-old woman, who was born in Singapore to a Chinese family and immigrated to Canada during her childhood, commented on her ethnic identity:

> I sometimes consider myself just an Asian compared to being a specific type of Asian, and also, compared to being a total Canadian or White-washed Asian Canadian. So I just place myself kind of in the middle between different cultures of Asian and North American. (Interviewee 21)

This ethnoracial identification may resonate with Kibria's (2003) claim about the racialization of ethnicity, in which young Asian Americans are interpellated into members in "a generalized Asian community" and, willingly or unwillingly, assume an Asian identity.

Asian Canadian fans' consumption of the racial affinity of K-pop can be considered a way of negotiating the racialization of Asians in Canadian society and positively reaffirming their race. The tendency of reaffirming Asian identity via K-pop may resonate with Ju and Lee's (2015) observation of Asian Americans' consumption of Korean pop culture, in which "the Korean content facilitates their ability to reminisce about the pan-ethnic identity as a member of the East Asian community. The emerging Korean media content can be an addition to their ethnic media repository" (p. 334). The interviewees' consumption of racial affinity might imply the positive, empowering resignification of their own ethnoracial identity, often marginalized by the dominant "White racial frame" (Feagin, 2013). The consumption of racial affinity among Asian Canadian K-pop fans can be explained by Haynes's (2013) notion of "positive racialization," which refers to the potential of race for ethnoracial minorities' self-recognition or sociality. Through positive racialization, Asian Canadian fans of K-pop can *use* their race to "interpret and order perceptions of phenotypical and cultural differences in ways that are deemed desirable or complimentary" (Haynes, 2013, p. 19). However, despite positive effects on people of color, positive racialization can be

problematic because it assumes an essentialist understanding of race (Haynes, 2013). Indeed, the interviewees' association of K-pop with positive features of Asian stars might produce another, albeit positive, stereotypical representation of Asian identity.

In this regard, a few interviewees' critical comments on the K-pop industry are noteworthy, because they imply that fans' dedication to K-pop may not always coincide with the essentialist positive racialization of K-pop. A 20-year-old Filipino Canadian man, who had been a dedicated member of an amateur K-pop cover dance team, lamented:

> I have a lot of friends who audition [to be K-pop idols], but they're Filipinos and they have darker skins. They don't get picked even though they're talented. It's just because they [the K-pop entertainment companies] look for . . . [a particular type of people], they have a certain fixed mind-set. They already know what they want, and that's what they'll get. They don't want to try anything different. (Interviewee 22)

According to this interviewee, K-pop idols increasingly look like White people. He added, "[In the K-pop industry] you have to be very slim and tall or whatever, and White. . . . You have to be White. Look at IU [a female K-pop idol]. Now she's as white as a ghost [laughs]." In this manner, a few fans in the study were keenly aware of the exclusive (or racist) aspect of K-pop. According to their accounts, K-pop might not be entirely free from the "White racial frame" (Feagin, 2013). Indeed, textual analyses of K-pop have suggested that K-pop music videos and idol personalities are integrated into a self-Orientalist representation of racialized and gendered identities (Epstein & Turnbull, 2014; Oh, 2014). These interviewees' critical accounts suggest that fans can explore what Parker and Song (2006) refer to as "reflexive racialization," in which racialized subjects reflexively negotiate the multiple and floating meanings of cultural identities.

To summarize, young Asian fans consumed racial affinities of K-pop and thus sought a positive reaffirmation of their Asian identities and responded to the White dominant mediascape. The fans' consumption of race could reproduce a positive, yet essentialized, representation of Asian identities, while several fans were critically aware of contradictions implicated in K-pop—such as racism and self-Orientalism.

Consuming Affective Affinity

Young fans' cultural affinities with K-pop are facilitated through not only racial negotiation but also the particular modes of affective engagement and consumption. In the study, fans tended to identify themselves with K-pop idols while describing idols as desirable individuals who might not be subject to racial hierarchies. In this process of affective engagement with K-pop and its stars, some young fans might internalize a particular affect—what can be considered a part of "neoliberal affect" (Anderson, 2016) or "neoliberal ethos" (Dardot & Laval, 2013)—the affect through which the logics of neoliberalism, such as market-driven self-development and individualization, are actualized in everyday life. Fans' consumption of cultural affinity facilitated by neoliberal affect was observed in interwoven processes of K-pop fan practices. Specifically, the young fans identified with K-pop idols as youthful and self-developing subjects

in their process of transition to adulthood. This identification process is further facilitated by technologically mediated intimacy with idols via social media. However, the fans' affective affinities with K-pop may not necessarily function as a process of empowerment, since this sense of cultural agency may obscure the way in which the fans are integrated into a larger social process reproducing neoliberal affect.

Above all, by identifying themselves with young K-pop idols, young fans tend to imagine themselves as youthful and successful selves. Pop music provides young people in transition to adulthood with the "pleasure of identification" through which they can place their position in relation to pop cultural figures (Frith, 1987). In the case of K-pop fandom, the relatively young age of K-pop idols appears to enhance the sense of affective affinities between fans and idols. Targeting young global consumer groups, the K-pop industry has recruited young performers, including some performers in their early teens. The average age of all K-pop idols who debuted in 2015 (a total of 324 people of 60 groups) was younger than 21 (Idology, 2016). The similar generational experiences of K-pop idols and their fans might enhance the relevance of K-pop for coping with the transition to adulthood. A 17-year-old high school student of Taiwanese heritage noted, "When I am having a hard time to study or anything, I just listen to K-pop and I see the lyrics and like, 'Yeah, they [have it] harder than me, so I should work harder'" (Interviewee 4). For her, K-pop seemed to be a cultural resource for negotiating the process of growing up.

> Interviewer: Then what does K-pop mean to you?
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> Interviewee 4: Life . . . It makes me become more into music and also teaches me how to dance. It has different styles of dances. And once I learn one dance, I can improve, improve, and improve and try to upload my dance [on YouTube], because it might be a great way to improve my dancing too. . . . And their [K-pop idols'] potential regarding singing skills and acting skills is so good . . . it will also encourage me a lot, and . . . K-pop makes me grown up, I think.

In this manner, K-pop was reappropriated as a meaningful resource for young fans' transition from the present to the imagined future. Not unlike other forms of youth pop culture fandom, "K-pop fandom can be a statement about their dispositions, dis/likings, and aspirations, not just reflective of the actual, present self but also formative of the desired, future self" (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015, pp. 6–7). However, the fans' appropriation of K-pop as a positive resource for growing up may not necessarily challenge the dominant discourse of youth transition to adulthood. That is, K-pop idols' highly disciplined and successful images, often recognized in the interviewees' accounts, may conform to the personhood that neoliberal economy seeks.

K-pop idols' perfectionism seemed to be particularly admired by the fans. A 20-year-old woman of Chinese descent, who actively participated in a K-pop cover dance group, remarked, "K-pop choreography is so creative and iconic, compared to that of Western pop and Canton pop (I also like)" (Interviewee 16). To her, K-pop idols were ideal performers whom she tried to resemble. K-pop idols' intensive training and efforts to be "perfect" appeared to inspire fans in the study. A 20-year-old woman of Chinese heritage commented on how K-pop idols' hard work motivated her:

> VIXX [a K-pop boy band], before they debuted, they actually went through difficult competitions and practiced so much, and then they wanted to be better. The process of improvement . . . touches me. . . . When I feel really tired with my life, like I don't want to study, but after looking at those idols, even though they are really tired or even sick, they still . . . work a lot, and then they just want their fans to be happy, and then entertain their audience. I feel like I also have to pay more effort and then . . . cheer up and then start working. (Interviewee 19)

Fans seem to be motivated to work hard for academic and career success by idealizing the Cinderella stories of their favorite K-pop stars. However, despite fans' admiration, K-pop idols' efforts and perfectionism are considered by critics as the outcome of systematic and forced labor under the idol system (Kang, 2015). The K-pop idol system has popular, yet notoriously competitive, audition and training processes, which have sometimes been aired on reality TV shows (Kwon, 2011). As Y. Kim (2011) defines it, the K-pop idol system embodies neoliberal affect as it is designed for "the mission and process of self-making as idols, regulated in the norms of competition, strategic training and management, self-reinvention, flexibility and multi-playing" (p. 336). That is, the idol system, which involves an intensive manufacturing process of idols drawing on neoliberal ethos, reproduces the image of an ideal neoliberal subjectivity through its idols who are equipped with the perfect body, competency, and friendly attitudes. By desiring, and identifying with, idols, young fans may internalize and exercise neoliberal affect.

Young K-pop fans' identification with idols as youthful, self-developing, and affective subjects is further stimulated in the extensive integration of social media into K-pop fan practices. In the study, young fans maintained interpersonal intimacy with idols through constant integration into social media, and in so doing, they seemed to consider the consumption of K-pop as an open and egalitarian process. K-pop was presented to the fans as a set of intimate and playful commodities that can be pleasurably and conveniently consumed. This tendency seemed to resonate with critics' claim that K-pop has depoliticized its messages for younger audience groups across national or cultural barriers (Lie, 2014). According to several interviewees, K-pop is a "gift set" that comprises playful, intimate, and creative idol stars and their music and choreographies. A 17-year-old female fan of Chinese descent stated, "K-pop idols are a kind of packaged gift set" (Interviewee 21). This response is not surprising, given that K-pop idols are designed as "one source–multi use" media personalities who appear in different media genres, such as music shows, reality TV shows, entertainment programs, and TV dramas, for maximizing profits (Seo, 2012).

As the music and videos are often available via free streaming video sites and YouTube, K-pop's cyberspace might be perceived as an egalitarian space drawing on a gift economy rather than a commodity economy. Despite their dedication, only a few fans in the study actually purchased the K-pop music files or merchandise. That is, most fans accessed K-pop via social media and streaming sites for free, and in so doing, the commodification of users' participation and social media's revenue model via targeted advertising seemed to be incorporated into the fans' daily media experiences (De Kosnik, 2013). K-pop's mediated gift economy also facilitates imaginary intimacy and emotional bonding between K-pop fans and idols. Social media platforms seemed to allow fans to be exposed to K-pop videos, idols' daily schedules, and other fans' activities. In particular, K-pop fans in the study were informed constantly about K-pop stars via social media platforms, while idols responded directly to their fans. According to many

interviewees, K-pop idols' intimate and responsive attitudes distinguished them from Western pop stars. A 20-year-old woman of Vietnamese heritage commented, "If you follow them [K-pop idols] on Twitter, Instagram, or their own personal social media, you get to see them. They're actually really fun, or goofy or they're big dorks, and they're lovable, and they're people" (Interviewee 25). In particular, Twitter is an increasingly important channel for overseas K-pop fans to follow and understand their stars and to demonstrate their dedication to the stars (S. Jung, 2013). The sense of instant and constant connection between K-pop idols and fans on social media appears to enhance their affective affinities.

The way in which K-pop idols and texts appeal to their young fans might not be entirely different from other forms of fan consumption. However, K-pop, which arose in Korea's precarious neoliberal economy period (Kang, 2015), might reflect the increasing tendency in which young people are forced to enjoy neoliberal "freedom". In this mediated space of neoliberal affect, the question of difference and structural forces, such as racial hierarchy, might be replaced with the matter of fans' individual efforts and achievements: self-development. In the imaginary circulation of K-pop that comprises "perfect" yet "intimate" idols, young fans are allowed to identify with perfect individuals. Through such identification, young fans might be misinterpellated into a possible and perfect youth. Thus, the neoliberal affect of K-pop may result in contradiction to the racial affinity discussed in the previous section, because neoliberal affect reflects the dominant discourse of color blindness or a raceless society, which tends to "conceal the messy business of structural and systemic inequality and the unequal relations of power that continue to exist in a democratic liberal society" (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 28).

Conclusion

This study examines how K-pop is culturally translated by its young fans of Asian backgrounds in Canada. These fans' cultural translation implies how a cultural text is reappropriated in, and meaningfully integrated with, another cultural context. In the study, fans found K-pop relatable to their cultural contexts especially through consuming racial and affective affinities in K-pop. Asian Canadian fans in the study seemed to challenge the racial stereotyping of K-pop and its fans as the other of the dominant Western mediascape. By positively and/or reflexively redefining racial meanings attached to K-pop, they realized and renegotiated the ongoing racialization of Asian ethnic groups in Canada. The fans' engagement with K-pop functioned as a process of realizing and exercising their identity as diasporic Asians, especially in contrast with the majority of local peers whose cultural tastes were more geared toward Western (American) pop music. Meanwhile, Asian Canadian fans in the study identified with K-pop idols who were often considered youthful and successful individuals. In this process, fans in the study engaged with a particular mode of affect—which has been named neoliberal affect, through which individuals willingly seek the model of a self-developing, entrepreneurial self. With this neoliberal affect, it appears that Asian Canadians fans' awareness of ongoing racialization is diluted or temporarily forgotten. These two seemingly contradictory translation processes—through *racial* and *affective* affinities—imply possibilities and risks for transcultural media flows. That is, although transcultural media could offer Asian Canadian youth a moment of empowerment by exploring and positively reaffirming their race, the audiences' affective affinity with K-pop idols could reinforce neoliberal subjectivity and thus obfuscate the social structures imposed on minority audiences.

Despite a general growth in the discourse of the Korean Wave and K-pop, little research has explored the way in which the *K* in K-pop is culturally translated by its receiving ends. The findings of the present research suggest that global K-pop fandom reveals probable frictions of transnational fan communities and contradictions that fans might have to negotiate in the process of cultural translation. As Annett (2011) has aptly noted, "a transcultural fan community is not necessarily a blissfully multicultural group where people of all origins are (supposedly) united in equality" (p. 173). In the present study, Asian Canadian fans of K-pop realized their racialized identities, which are different from those of nonracialized, White youth. Meanwhile, young Asian Canadians' fan experiences might be different from those of Asia-based fans, whose geocultural proximity with Korean pop culture has been referred to as "Asian sensibilities" (Cho, 2011). In contrast to Asia-based youth who may share a geoculturally driven pan-Asian identity, Asian Canadian fans negotiate racial affinities in relation to the dominant "White racial frame" (Feagin, 2013), and in so doing reimagine their Asian homelands that they or their parents left behind. In this process, K-pop culture in Canada is integrated into a wider context of Asian Canadian youth culture and its "diaspora aesthetics" (Hall, 1990, p. 236). While further empirical studies are required to investigate K-pop's "diaspora aesthetics," through which diasporic youth share cultural affinities, the aforementioned two modes of affinity suggest that K-pop is racialized as a diasporic Asian practice and is deracialized as a technologically mediated neoliberal process of self-development. Transcultural studies of K-pop fan audiences imply that cultural translation paradoxically involves the audiences' active localization of differences (e.g., race), on the one hand, and homogenizing forces driven by neoliberal affect and social media platforms, on the other hand.

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