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COMMENTARIES

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K-pop pedagogy in the digital platform era

During the pandemic, it has become evident that media technology is not only an instrument but also constitutes a core environment in our daily lives. Digital media has been deeply integrated into the context of learning and teaching. As digitally mediated pedagogy has served as the default mode of teaching and learning in most educational settings during the pandemic, it is important to re-examine the ways in which media pedagogy intersects with digital culture. Consequently, this article proposes an experimental mode of pedagogy by engaging with South Korean pop music (K-pop); this mode will be referred to as ‘K-pop pedagogy’.

K-pop pedagogy is an operational term that points to a set of practices and methods of enhancing digital media literacy through the critical analysis of K-pop and its global circulation.¹ K-pop is more than a music genre; it has emerged as a global cultural phenomenon that comprises various components, such as digital media, fandom and the media industry. Indeed, the K-pop phenomenon has been reliant on the South Korean music industry’s extensive engagement with global digital media platforms, whereby audiences’ participation has been facilitated (Jin et al. 2021). K-pop’s proactive deployment of digital technologies and literacies has made it an interesting pedagogical resource, as shown in a few experimental projects (Kim 2017; Wooten et al. 2020).

1. For a comprehensive musicological analysis of contemporary K-pop as a musical form, see Fuhr (2016).

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The K-pop phenomenon as a global and digital wave (Jin et al. 2021) offers an engaging case for learning and teaching how transnational cultural content is circulated through digital platforms while reaching out to global audiences. The global–local conjunction through digital platforms has enabled viral and global flows of K-pop. Teaching and learning digital media through the analysis of the K-pop phenomenon contributes to critiquing the western-centric framework of media studies and exploring the meanings of digital media technology as an environment of pedagogy. Furthermore, K-pop pedagogy can help overcome the divide between micro-level cultural analysis (of cultural texts or audiences) and macro-level political economic analysis.

THE PEDAGOGY OF DE-WESTERNIZED KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

The global rise of K-pop allows us to critically rethink the western-oriented global mediascape, in which a few major industries have played a predominant role in terms of market share and cultural influence. The United State (US) music industry accounts for over 30 per cent of the global music market in terms of retail value (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry [IFPI] 2020), and US-based digital platforms, such as Google and Facebook, are increasing their global market dominance, which is referred to as ‘platform imperialism’ (Jin 2013). Moreover, English-language content had long dominated global music markets until the late-2010s, when an increasing amount of non-English content began to be circulated through social media; the number of non-English songs among YouTube’s annual global top 10 hits has rapidly increased (zero in 2015, one in 2016, six in 2017 and eight in 2018) (Ingham 2019). Undeniably, the rapidly expanding global K-pop fanbase has contributed to the de-westernization of popular cultural flows. According to a global survey conducted in 2020, the fans of the famous K-pop group BTS (collectively named the ‘ARMY’) are found in more than 100 countries (with Indonesia, Mexico, the United States, Peru and the Philippines being the five major fan bases) (ARMY Census 2020). This may signal a new trend of transnational cultural flow – that is, from a non-western context to other non-western contexts and the West – which can be called a ‘contra-flow’ (Thussu 2006).

Learning media studies through this contra-flow genre of K-pop reminds us that media and cultural studies as a discipline has been dominated by the process of western-centric knowledge production and has insufficiently addressed non-western cultural content (Shome 2016). The recent global circulation of K-pop as cultural content originating from the non-western, once-peripheral, K-pop media industry calls for an alternative media curriculum that engages with cultural diversity. Media studies has long avoided ‘speaking in subtitles’ (Dwyer 2017) while engaging heavily and exclusively in western frames of reference. Introducing K-pop as a new subject matter in a western media studies classroom may give rise to mixed responses, even including feelings such as discomfort, tension, curiosity, fetishism and ignorance. Depending on their subject positions, students may receive the transnational flows of K-pop differently. It has been observed that mainstream (including white) audiences ignore or racialize the K-pop phenomenon, while some young audiences of colour identify more easily with K-pop idols and other fans (Yoon 2019). According to empirical studies, overseas audiences’ consumption of K-pop is signified differently depending on their social contexts. Among young people, K-pop has functioned as a subcultural

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practice through which relations of race, gender and social class are contested (Min et al. 2019; Yoon 2019).

By encountering the non-western cultural texts and practices of K-pop, students in media studies classrooms can become aware of their intersectional positions. Furthermore, K-pop's hybrid textuality, including the mixture of different languages and cultural conventions, offers media students opportunities to rethink the conventions and definitions of the western-oriented mainstream media genre. K-pop fans in North American contexts often negotiate the hegemonic, even racist, responses to K-pop, in which the Orientalist discourse shapes non-western cultural texts as the other of the default media setting (Jin et al. 2021). K-pop pedagogy reminds us that although western institutions have played a role as the gatekeeping authority that has introduced and evaluated 'other' (non-western) cultures for decades, the western media is not the 'global' norm but only a local form.²

Examining BTS's recent rise and its fandom, J. O. Kim (2021: 1072) defined the BTS phenomenon as a counter-hegemonic cultural practice that 'brings peripheral/non-western actors together and encourages them to identify their differences from their core/western counterparts' (see also Cho 2020). Indeed, the BTS fandom has actively participated in campaigns for social justice and social change, as exemplified in their collective engagement with Black Lives Matter movements (2020), anti-Trump campaigns in Tulsa (2020) and anti-government protests in Santiago, Chile (2019–20) (Cho 2020; Zaveri 2020). In Asia, K-pop has also been used as a counter-hegemonic instrument in Bangkok, Hong Kong and Seoul, where anti-government youth sang several K-pop songs as their protest anthems (Tanakasempipat 2020). The difference and unfamiliarity of K-pop, especially in comparison to the dominant western Anglophone music, offer the audience larger room for sociocultural engagement. By making an effort to decode the cultural practice of K-pop, which involves cultural and linguistic components that differ from their own, young people can learn how to appreciate, use and negotiate cultural differences to engage with their own local questions.³

THE PEDAGOGY OF DIGITAL PARTICIPATION LITERACY

Another contribution that K-pop pedagogy can make to media studies is its ability to enable students to engage with participatory culture (Jenkins 2006) and advance the critical literacy of digital participation. Digital media technology has been considered to facilitate a new type of literacy, referred to as 'digital participation literacy', especially among young people (Rheingold 2012). According to this thesis, social media and digital platforms allow users to develop various media skills, such as curating, editing, remixing and sharing online content (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins et al. 2013; Rheingold 2012).

K-pop encourages students to interpret the text of cultural difference through networked audiences' collaboration and participation in digital media practices. To overcome the cultural and language barriers inscribed in K-pop, global fans engage extensively with digital media. They share their own interpretations, which often involve the re-contextualization of original texts. As seen in the user-created videos of dance covers and reactions (to original K-pop videos and other fans' videos), participatory digital production has been a common fan practice. Shortly after the release of a new K-pop single, global fans perform the original choreography and record dance covers (with

2. As the Korean film director Bong Joon-Ho reminded us in his interview prior to being nominated for and receiving Oscars for *Parasite*, the Academy Awards (Oscars) is in reality supposed to be a 'very local' event despite its global publicity and marketing power. De-westernizing media studies may need to begin with moving away from the myth that western worlds are the norm and standard and, in so doing, 'provincializing' the West (Chakrabarty 2009).
3. While several K-pop groups have incorporated English into their songs and BTS recently released entirely English-written songs, it is noteworthy that the global K-pop phenomenon has dismantled the global music market, in which the English language is considered the norm for market success. Overseas, K-pop fans are reportedly willing to learn Korean or use peer translations to appreciate and understand their idols (Lee 2019). The K-pop phenomenon has demonstrated that the hegemony of English in the global media market is increasingly being challenged. K-pop fans' willingness to participate in cultural translation reveals diversified, contra-flowing modes of cultural globalization.

lip syncing) at their local go-to places, which range from shopping malls to their own bedrooms (Liew 2013).

By creating and/or viewing reaction videos, media students can learn how to decode and evaluate a new K-pop video produced in a different cultural context. This popular user-generated genre encourages viewers to engage with other people's reactions to K-pop (Kim 2015; Swan 2018). This practice of sharing one's own reaction with others facilitates the playful processes of learning and exploring critical media literacy through the consumption (and production) of pop cultural content. Indeed, K-pop's reaction video culture makes space for the audience's diverse reinterpretation of the original texts while offering some viewers a sense of comforting universality by enabling them to appreciate the similarities between their own reactions and those of other viewers (Anderson 2011). Reaction videos and dance cover videos trigger a domino effect because they invite other reactors and audience members to respond. This practice highlights the networked nature of popular culture consumption in the digital platform era (Kim 2021). By viewing, sharing and analysing fans' videos filmed in different geocultural contexts, media students can explore how a media text is resituated and reoriented by participatory audiences who are seamlessly networked through ubiquitous online media.

Of course, K-pop does not always facilitate participation literacy, with which cultural difference is acknowledged and potentially evolves as a counter-hegemonic force. K-pop also reveals the contradictions and limitations of popular culture and digital platforms. It is not simply a signifier of youthful, participatory, counter-hegemonic cultural movements. K-pop is a cultural trend that is not free of the commodifying forces of the media industry. Moreover, until recently, the K-pop industry has been ignorant of themes such as cultural diversity and social equity (Chatman 2020) and has even been accused of exploiting young musicians to maximize profits (Chung 2019). For example, several K-pop groups have been criticized for their insensitive appropriation of other cultures, such as black hip hop music, or their use of misogynistic or racist language in their song lyrics, interviews and/or social media postings (Chung 2019). Because of their previous insensitive attitudes towards cultural diversity and social issues, K-pop artists' recent engagement with social justice activities has received cynical responses from some fans and critics (Chatman 2020).

The K-pop industry's extensive integration with social media offers another important aspect of contradiction that is implicated in the transnational circulation of popular culture. Specifically, K-pop is a cultural genre that is highly dependent on social media, rather than conventional media channels, for its global dissemination. Social media has played a pivotal role in accelerating global young people's participatory consumption of K-pop, which originated in a non-western country. The fans' grassroots and interactive online activities, including collaborative translation, have, in turn, contributed to the development of social and digital media. For example, an interactive video content service called Viki (viki.com) initially emerged as a fan-inspired start-up and incorporated fans' labour in the form of translation and comments into its interactive design (Dwyer 2017). By analysing the K-pop industry's capitalization of fan activities to accelerate the transnational flows of K-pop, we can be better informed regarding how transnational culture is commodified through social media platforms.

The commodification of culture, which is one of the key themes of the political economy of media, is not necessarily unidirectional but, rather,

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involves several interwoven and even contradictory forces. In particular, K-pop's participatory fan culture is commodified by the K-pop industry, global social media platforms and fan audiences. First, the K-pop industry has strategically explored social media platforms – YouTube and Twitter in particular – to promote its content and expand its global market. Major K-pop entertainment companies have integrated global talents (producers, composers and choreographers) into their own 'in-house' systems to train and produce globally appealing idols while widely deploying various social media strategies. Second, global social media platforms, such as YouTube, have accelerated the commodification of K-pop's participatory culture. Reaction video vloggers and cover dancers are increasingly eager to be micro-celebrities or influencers (Kim 2015). The platform providers' (e.g. YouTube) monetization of both K-pop content and its fan activities is potentially detrimental to the K-pop industry and audience. In particular, the participatory fan may be continuously interpellated as an 'audience commodity', whose attention and data are sold to advertisers and corporations (Fuchs 2012). Third, in response to the platform-driven attention economy that recognizes dedicated users as 'influencers', some audience members are integrated into the process of commodifying K-pop. By dedicating their time and labour to promoting not only their K-pop idols but also their own reaction videos and dance cover videos, the fans have incorporated their media practices deeply into the attention economy and thus engaged in the commodification of culture.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, by analysing and participating in the K-pop phenomenon, media students can critically engage with the dilemmas and negotiation of transnational cultural flows in the digital platform era. K-pop pedagogy offers a means of rethinking western-centric knowledge production in media studies and the global platform-driven commodification of culture. Moreover, K-pop as a pedagogic resource reveals that the global fans' grassroots participation in the K-pop 'universe' contributes to the exploration of an alternative cultural space in which media fan audiences question the existing hegemonic social order (Jin et al. 2021; Kim 2021; Yoon 2019). Through this cultural phenomenon, we can identify existing and new problematics in media studies. In particular, media studies can expand its scope to move beyond its narrow understanding of media technology as an instrument of western-centric globalization while critically addressing the limitations implicated in the affordances of digital media. In so doing, K-pop pedagogy can question the utopian discourse that was pervasive in media studies prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which 'digital fatigue' (Alevizou 2020) has been intensively increased.

In response to the question of the use of media and media studies in the (post-)pandemic era, K-pop as a digital media fan-driven contra-flow provides leverage for creative and critical thinking. In the abundance and imposition of technologically mediated communications during the pandemic, K-pop groups and their fans have maintained their intimate, collaborative spaces through various social media tools, from YouTube to the Korean-based personal broadcasting app V-Live. K-pop communities' transnational digital communications have contributed to questioning the dominant western-centric gatekeeping of non-western media forms. In particular, through their creative use of digital media, BTS and its fans have exemplified how digital media can maximize its aesthetic, commercial and activist potential. As Cho (2020) noted, BTS's

digital media-driven interactions with its fans served to enhance their sense of belonging and to address structural inequalities and injustice that have been revealed during the pandemic period. In this way, K-pop pedagogy can show how media studies engage with the 'pandemic media' (media practices that have emerged during the pandemic period and addressed pandemic-related issues) and envision the post-pandemic era (Cho 2020).

K-pop pedagogy is a method of teaching and learning digital media through analysing and participating in the recent transnational and digital media-driven phenomenon of K-pop and its fandom. This pedagogy provides a reflection on and antidote to the commodification of culture in the digital platform era and (post-)pandemic times. During and after the pandemic, we may witness an increase in the power of digital media platforms. K-pop pedagogy offers momentum for critical media literacy to penetrate the contradiction between digital media platforms and transnational flows of media culture. By engaging with unfamiliar and non-western cultural content and practices, students can explore how to reorient the flows and directions of globalization (Iwabuchi 2002; Jin et al. 2021). By using K-pop as a pedagogical resource in the digital platform-saturated COVID-19 period, teachers and learners can critically engage with the potential, limitations and affordances of digital media and practices.

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