

The Role of Digital Media Platforms in the Global Dissemination of K-pop: A Case Study of the Chinese Market

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Abstract. As K-pop's global influence expands, its presence in China has grown significantly, especially among teenagers. While existing studies have explored K-pop's digital media mechanisms and cross-cultural communication, most focus on single platforms or fan groups, overlooking the broader ecosystem of Chinese digital media and its challenges. This paper examines the roles of short video, long video, music, and social media platforms in the dissemination of K-pop in China, analyzing how each contributes to public engagement, content depth, commercialization, and cultural integration. Using case analysis and literature review, the study investigates platform-specific strategies, such as viral challenges on short videos, secondary creation on long videos, copyright-driven consumption on music platforms, and fan-driven topic fermentation on social media. Digital media platforms significantly enhance K-pop's reach and influence in China. However, challenges such as policy restrictions, cultural misalignment, content homogeneity, and local competition hinder sustainable growth. Future development relies on customized content and technological innovation, such as VR and virtual idols, to deepen market resonance.

Keywords: Kpop, digital media, cross-cultural communication, Chinese market, platform strategies

1. Introduction

As a representative of Korean culture, K-pop's popularity continues to rise in China, and many teenagers prefer following Korean idols over local ones. Scholar Cai Yingjing [1] pointed out in the article that the success of k-pop bases the mass industrialization of those large companies to create stars, using standardized music output and localized symbols to meet the needs of various regions. According to a report from Media Watch [2], with the development of the Internet, fan groups on social platforms have become the core power of cross-cultural communication. Although many studies have discussed the digital media mechanisms of K-pop, its communication role, and the use of the Chinese market as a comparative case, two significant gaps remain. First, most research tends to focus on a single platform or phenomenon, overemphasizing fan groups when discussing K-pop. Nevertheless, the largest base of mass carriers and different social media are ignored. Additionally, there is insufficient discussion regarding the challenges and opportunities digital media encounters in spreading content across Chinese social platforms. This paper adopts the methods of case analysis and literature analysis. The significance of the research is to enrich the relationship between cross-

culture communication, digital media and the pop culture-kpop. It focuses on the Chinese market to provide valuable insights into the dissemination of K-pop.

2. The role and function of digital media platforms in the Chinese market communication

2.1. Short video platforms-kpop virality and public participation

In contemporary society, the social mobility brought about by the development of communication has been defined by scholars as the “new mobility model” [3]. This means that in the global media environment, individual users can do communication virtually during a larger scale, thus promoting the globalization of digital media. Among social platforms, short videos occupy a large space in the current Chinese market. The window to capture attention is often just three seconds, while its fragmentation and variety are key characteristics that attract the public. On short video platforms such as Kuaishou, TikTok and WeChat video accounts, K-pop content is typically released in formats such as dance highlights ranging from 15 to 60 seconds, new song’s debut dance performances, idol offline fan meeting interactions and edited music show performances to spread culture and also attract public attention. In China’s short video platforms, this method lowers the requirement for communication and engagement, turning the audience from the single group of fans to general public. As long as a tag is added, everyone can join the discussion, which promotes the participation of non-core fans, that is, the whole people. For example, the popular trend Wongyoung circle challenge, Rose’s APT dance challenge, and the TV series “When Life Gives You Tangerines” the male lead’s smile imitation have all formed secondary creations and promoted the dissemination effect.

2.2. Long video platforms-in-depth content environment and secondary creation culture

Unlike fragmented short videos, long video platforms focus more on providing more complete and high-quality content which relevant with k-pop. In China, Bilibili is a commonly used long video platform, and its content type, duration, and video quality all far exceed the resources of short video platforms [4,5]. For instance, the reposts of complete music videos (MV), collections of song stages, the documentaries of the idol group, and the Korean variety shows, and so on. The resources provided by the long video platform meet the requirements of “complete narrative” and “detail capture”, allowing fans and other viewers to watch them repeatedly. Like the song called “Blueming” by Korean solo female singer IU at the 2019 concert, which reached nearly 30 million views on Bilibili. At the same time, the dissemination of long video also includes the secondary output of fans. The official videos trigger fans’ own thoughts and ideas, and are processed and uploaded to the long video platform for other viewers to express their opinions. Examples include the metaphor of storyline in the MV, the stage performance reaction (dance movement analysis, singing skills evaluation) and even other analyses. In order to cater to the Chinese market, these long videos are usually supplemented with Chinese subtitles and popular science content about South Korean local knowledge to help non-Korean audiences better understand the culture and gain a sense of engagement. In the digital media platform of China’s long video, the combination of official resources and secondary creation is no longer a simple entertainment pastime, but has evolved into in-depth content that needs to be interpreted and digested by the audience themselves.

2.3. Music platform-copyright monopoly and consumption symbolization

The core essence of K-pop concept output lies in the release of albums or singles. Only with song production can subsequent operations such as music show performances, physical albums, related merchandise, concerts, or other commercial models be implemented. In the Chinese market, official music platforms like QQ Music and NetEase Cloud Music monopolize the copyright of K-pop songs, becoming an indispensable link between Korean entertainment companies and Chinese listeners. The formal release of K-pop audio content, including new songs and OSTs, must be distributed through contracted music platforms in China.

Simultaneously, music platforms associate K-pop songs with fan support, transforming the free act of listening into a consumption symbol of supporting idols. The launch of new songs accompanies the consumption of clearly priced digital albums (regulations such as being unable to listen to the complete song without purchase or only having free access for one month are commonplace). Fans enhance music chart rankings through repeated purchases, using the “sales surge” culture to demonstrate their idols’ popularity. Platforms also establish various incentives to stimulate consumption, such as offering commemorative fan plaques to those who purchase within specific rankings, or providing opportunities to exchange for idol autographed photos; purchasing corresponding quantities of digital albums unlocks exclusive benefits (high-definition videos, exclusive platform selfies, paid voice messages, live streaming access, digital postcards, and other special privileges).

The data from music platforms is also adopted by the planning departments of Korean entertainment companies to adjust future strategies and cater to Chinese market preferences. For instance, after the Chinese version of EXO’s “Overdose” achieved significantly higher streaming numbers than the original Korean version on QQ Music, SM Entertainment released more Chinese-customized songs such as “Miracles in December” and “Growl.” Similarly, NetEase Cloud Music’s data indicated that TWICE’s energetic style songs were immensely popular in the Chinese market, prompting JYP Entertainment to strengthen this style in subsequent comebacks. Consequently, Chinese music platforms, as digital media channels, not only widely disseminate K-pop music sources but also function as feedback mechanisms.

2.4. Social platforms-circle breakthrough and topic fermentation

Social platforms are favored by the Chinese public for their strong immediacy, ease of topic fermentation, and high degree of free discussion. In China’s digital media landscape, common social platforms include Weibo, Little Redbook, WeChat, and others. Through joining fan groups, visiting celebrity super topics, and following accounts of influential K-pop fans or support clubs, fans are united into organized and disciplined groups. Collective fan actions are typically uniformly organized by support clubs, such as comment management, ranking support, data enhancement, album purchases during idol comeback periods, and fundraising for concert support.

Through the medium of social platforms, K-pop updates are precisely synchronized and forwarded to Chinese fans, with the weekly discussion and interaction volume in Chinese super topics of top Korean idols reaching up to three million. Social platforms also serve as crucial venues for identity formation. On Little Redbook, users can encounter various posts such as one-day concert vlogs, merchandise unboxings, and discussions about new songs. Sometimes, not only fans but also casual viewers for entertainment purposes will click in to ask questions and participate in discussions.

Focusing on the broader public, factors such as trending lists on social platforms, recommendation algorithms, and fan efforts have shifted K-pop content from serving merely fans to penetrating the general market, a phenomenon commonly known as “breaking the circle.” Due to the large fan base and their systematic approach to heating up topics, K-pop-related content generally generates higher discussion volume than typical social events or news. Additionally, when the heat of topics created by fans reaches a certain threshold, platform algorithms automatically promote them, introducing them into the public view through channels such as Weibo’s trending lists and Little Redbook’s homepage recommendations. More non-fan groups receive precise push notifications based on their browsing habits, and K-pop content is more likely to generate widespread discussion—evolving into a universal social symbol—thanks to its controversial nature, catchy and humorous elements, and memorable moments.

3. Challenges and future development of K-pop in Chinese market

3.1. The crisis faced in the digital media environment

Under national regulatory guidance, the “policy restricting South Korea culture content” serves as the fundamental principle for digital media platforms to balance public demand with the appropriate handling of k-pop-related content. As a result, k-pop content is often taken down by platform, and artists are unable to conduct activities in mainland China. Meanwhile, digital media boasts strong immediacy-information, whether verified or not, can spread rapidly in a short period. Due to language barriers and differing national stances, when South Korean idols’ public statements are translated and analyzed, sensitive topics such as history, territorial issues, and the ownership of intangible cultural heritage are amplified and debated extensively. Beyond that, with the rise of k-pop culture in China, some Chinese entrepreneurs have identified business opportunities and begun cultivating domestic idol groups. For instance, highly discussed annual talent shows like Idol Producer and Produce 101, as well as idol groups under the cultivation-oriented company Time Fengjun Entertainment—such as TFBOYS, Teens in Times (TNT), and Transform Project (TOP)—have adopted similar marketing strategies and leveraged digital media platforms to generate buzz, thus diverting a portion of the K-pop audience. Furthermore, issues have started to emerge within the k-pop industry itself. Newly emerged 5th and 6th generation idol groups suffer from obvious content homogeneity, lacking unique personal traits and memorable points. The key elements like albums and single styles are highly similar, and MVs lack innovative concepts, leading audiences to feel aesthetic fatigue toward existing works in the market. This also relates to the modern societal trend of pursuing fast-paced, fragmented storytelling and communication. On social platforms, people tend to focus more on idols’ makeup and clothes, as well as hyped topics, rather than on music output with valuable content. At the same time, k-pop works rarely cater to the Chinese market or establish cultural connections. Many culturally specific meanings in song lyrics make it difficult for Chinese audiences to understand, not to mention the deep meaning behind them.

3.2. Future development trends of digital media

In the Chinese market, how can k-pop utilize digital media to enhance user stickiness and achieve sustainable development? First, it should launch customized content, such as participating in popular song and dance challenges on digital platforms and learning about Chinese local culture to establish a deeper emotional connection and resonance with Chinese fans. Meanwhile, with the vigorous development of technology, the advancement of VR technology can serve as a new breakthrough.

For instance, this could include hosting 3D live concerts where idols appear as lifelike figures once users put on VR headsets, as well as creating virtual idols to fill market gaps.

4. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the specific functions and roles of long-form video, short-form videos, music platforms and social platforms in the Chinese media market, providing a detailed introduction and explanation of the role digital media plays in the dissemination of k-pop. Short videos, with their advantages of efficiency and accessibility, lower the threshold for dissemination and capture public attention; long videos enable in-depth reflection and consideration; music platforms tied to copyrights support traffic monetization; and finally, social platforms help K-pop culture expand from a niche fan base to mainstream public discourse. However, the paper also points out the current issues faced by K-pop, such as external policy restrictions, low cultural alignment between K-pop's transmitted content and Chinese culture, aesthetic fatigue caused by the repeated emergence of homogeneous content, and the rise and competition of China's local market. For k-pop's long term development in the future, it still needs to rely on the innovative development of emerging digital media to adapt and meet the demands of the Chinese market.

This study only focuses on changes in the Chinese market and describes K-pop's development from the perspective of a single dimension—Chinese digital media platforms. Future research directions can supplement and improve the study in the following two aspects: first, focusing on dynamic changes in the market, such as market supply and user demand; second, expanding the research scope to analyze the role of digital media platforms in K-pop dissemination from the perspective of other media types and different contexts.

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