

An Analysis of Commercial Communication Paths of Korean Pop Idols in the Context of New Media

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Abstract: With the development of new media, K-pop has successfully realized cross-cultural communication. Some researchers have analyzed the Korean wave fan groups and the marketing strategies of the Korean wave, but they still lack a correct understanding of the current situation of the commercialization of Korean wave idols and the potential problems. Therefore, through literature analysis, case analysis, and comparative analysis, this paper explores the commercial communication path of Korean pop idols in the context of new media. Finally, the study found that the lack of self-awareness of Korean idols, the politicization of idols, and cultural strategies formulated by the government are the leading causes of the problem. Therefore, people should set up their independent values and judgment in daily contact with Korean Wave culture, and the media should also play a good role in checking and supervising communication to promote positive cultural exchanges between China and South Korea.

Keywords: new media, K-pop, culture communication, politicization of idols, cultural appropriation

1. Introduction

1.1. Overview of the Korean Entertainment Industry

K-pop, Korean Pop, refers to Korean popular music and its related popular culture. K-pop originated in the 1990s, when the first generation of Korean idols, such as H.O.T, S.E.S, and Crystal Boy emerged. K-pop has a strong and unique style, with rhythmic dances, brainwashed refrains, and energetic musical forms. The songs also cover various topics, such as love, social phenomena, world views. K-pop has penetrated the lives of most people who enjoy Korean culture, and has profoundly influenced their cognition and actions [1].

K-pop is now in a boom stage, and the market is still expanding. During the quarantine period of Covid-19, K-pop has attracted a large number of fans in the United States and Europe through YouTube, TikTok, and various social media platforms. "K-pop was a niche music culture in the West until a few years ago," said Lee Hyun-ji, a researcher at EUGENE Securities. "As the number of consumers and the number of fans increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, Korean artists made a big push into the North American market." [2] According to customs statistics, the proportion of Korean physical album exports to non-Asian countries also increased significantly, while that of the United States tripled from 5.3 percent in 2017 to 17.2 percent last year [2].

1.2. The International Development of Korean Entertainment Industry

In recent years, with the development of new media and the increasing inclusiveness of world culture, K-pop has been vigorously promoted on social platforms around the world and has attracted a large number of fans and fans [3]. K-pop has spread beyond Korea and Asia as its global influence has grown stronger. More and more K-pop groups and singers are appearing on the world stage. For example, at the opening ceremony of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, Jung Kook, a member of Korean idol group BTS, sang the opening ceremony theme song Dreamers. K-pop has become a strong international market and is no longer a niche genre. The spread of K-pop has brought more attention to Korean culture and contributed greatly to the growth of global culture [4]. In general, K-pop is not only a kind of pop music but also represents the cultural spirit of South Korea, from which many entertainment and cultural enterprises have gained good economic benefits and enriched the world culture. K-pop will continue to influence the development of global culture in the future.

1.3. Significance of the Study

At present, there are many discussions and studies on K-pop at home and abroad, but most of them are limited to fan culture or the development of K-pop. People lack an independent and profound understanding of the cultivation system of Korean idols, the driving role of capital behind them, and the way of cross-cultural communication. With the development of new media, today's Korean Wave stars have already successfully entered the Chinese market and are favored by many Chinese fans. At the same time, K-pop is also subtly affecting the lives of Chinese fans. However, people's Internet behavior (including search behavior, preference behavior, etc.) will be analyzed and recorded by the big data platform, and personalized melon content will be pushed. That leaves some room for capital. When there is no objective judgment for things, Internet users are easily guided to think, resulting in wrong-oriented thinking. If people lack a fundamental understanding of K-pop and their own independent thinking, they will be easily exploited and cheated by companies and capital. Moreover, in the spreading process of K-pop, it is inevitable to integrate and exchange Chinese and Korean cultures. K-pop fans are direct recipients of Korean cultural exports. This will profoundly impact people's impression and cognition of Chinese and Korean culture. Therefore, I hope that more attention and research can be paid to the commercial transmission path and some development problems of K-pop. The development and support of new media, its cross-cultural communication process, and the influence of politics, the economy, and the community on K-pop fans should not be ignored [5]. Therefore, it is hoped this paper can arouse people's thinking and independent thoughts and cognition when they receive K-pop culture so as to have objective and rational value judgments of K-pop culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Development and Support of New Media

In modern society, People's Daily life is increasingly dependent on a variety of media, and the content presented by the media is usually edited, produced and reprocessed. The maker of the media landscape has a purpose, and the landscape is a packaged product in a sense [6]. The maturity of the media environment makes the landscape penetrate all aspects of social life. From TV screens to social networks, the audio-visual enjoyment brought by media together with personal emotional experience, construct a super real world [6]. Visual K-pop music is the product of the media landscape.

Compared with the past, today's K-pop fans can quickly access information about their idols via the Internet, including music videos, singing stages, variety shows, concerts, and advertising endorsements. People observe their idols' strength, appearance and character by watching and

understanding them day after day. Moreover, people can freely share their own opinions, ideas, and experiences on the network platform, and can always follow the latest trends of idols.

Multi-channel promotion is now a necessary skill for cross-cultural communication [7]. The emergence and development of mass media also promoted the popularity of Korean idol groups in China. For example, many idol groups frequently appear on China's Weibo hot searches to encourage and improve their popularity. There are previews and promotions of returning songs, the latest stage performances of idols, controversial events caused by idols, and Reuter participating in commercial events. This can, to some extent, ensure the agency's revenue, letting more people know about an idol. Some overseas fans will also participate in offline activities to support idols through relevant information from the media [8].

2.2. Idol's Commercial Development Path

Different fan cultures breed different idol industries [9]. The different economic bases and historical evolution of fans in China, Japan and South Korea eventually gave birth to completely different idol business models [9].

South Korea is best known for its "trainee" model, in which agencies hold regular talent shows to recruit trainees, who are then trained for a year or two or as long as a decade. Every trainee has to go through a full range of skills such as vocal music, dance, body, public relations, and layers of selection. Finally, the company will combine the outstanding and in line with the concept of a combination of trainees into a team, to create a perfect comprehensive strength of idol products. Girls' Generation member Jessica spent seven years practicing as well as BIGBANG member G-Dragon even spent nine years. They practice for more than 10 hours a day in a rigorous environment, and the talent they hone is often a level higher than idol competitors in other regions. Therefore, they can become popular idols after their debut and become popular all over Asia and even the world.

This model is typically characterized by high profits and high costs [9]. The cost is obvious. It takes a long time for a trainee to polish, and the investment of manpower and training resources is very high. Therefore, such a model can only be developed in an emerging developed country such as Korea, where fans have strong consumption power [9].

China's idol industry is still incomplete and developing and lacks influential idol groups at home and abroad. Many economic companies in China aim for short-term profits and quick money, and they don't think about idols' long-term development. The host once revealed on a variety show that some economical companies in China would sign up 100 teenagers at a time in order to make money, and then send them to participate in a large number of domestic talent shows. If one of them is a hit, the agency is profitable. The other 99 are delayed in the most precious years of their youth, and many end up in endless financial disputes over contracts and companies that end up paying hefty damages.

2.3. Collation of Relevant Literature

Qing Chen studied the development of Korean wave fan groups in online communities in 2015. She found that the development of online communities has an integration and cohesion effect on fan groups. With the development of new media, fan groups show different compositions and characteristics. The Internet has broken through geographical and administrative restrictions. Fans, as individuals, are not familiar with each other and have no contact with each other. They can gather together and form a group only through the Internet. On the other hand, with the advent of the WEB3.0 era, the fan groups have gradually shifted from Tieba and BBS to we-media organizations such as WeChat and Weibo to fight for the right to speak [10].

In 2016, Dai Wei analyzed the overseas marketing strategies of South Korean cultural products from three aspects and summed up the rules for reference. Taking advantage of popular culture and

making full use of traditional and modern media marketing methods, Korean cultural products have formed a cultural "Korean wave" phenomenon in Asia and even the whole world. The successful overseas marketing of Korean cultural products not only makes use of the popular culture of "Korean wave", but also boosts the acceptance and pursuit of "Korean wave" culture by overseas audiences. Its overseas marketing concepts and practices are worthy of reference for Chinese cultural products seeking to "go out" [3].

In 2015, Li Xinru discussed the influence of the Korean Wave on contemporary Chinese youth's patriotism, their sense of identity with Korean culture and their daily life practice, as well as the role of Korean Wave on Chinese youth culture. She found that more and more young people chase the Korean Wave and identify with Korean culture, which reflects the influence of diverse cultures on young people. The internal needs of individuals, the social needs of external identification, and the social differences make them have star worship and emotional belonging. This kind of identification of Korean culture has inter-generational characteristics [11].

The above literature mainly studies the influence of the development of the Internet on the Korean Wave fan base, the overseas marketing strategies of the Korean Wave, and the influence of contemporary Chinese youth. Next, this study will focus on the analysis of the current situation and potential problems of the commercial development of Korean idols, from the three aspects of idol's subjective initiative, politics and cultural appropriation.

3. Current Situation and Issues of Commercial Development of Korean Idol

3.1. The Low Subjective Initiative of Korean Idols

The training and management mode of Korea Economic Corporation leads to the lack of voice of artists and makes it easy to be controlled by companies and capital. The Korea Economic Corporation usually selects students who are still in elementary and middle school. They were trained in the company at an early age. And trainee debut competition is very fierce. They need to pass a weekly or monthly internal assessment, otherwise, they will be eliminated at any time. Besides, they have to go through rigorous professional training and gradual selection to be eligible for the debut. In this process, they need to humbly accept criticism and evaluation from teachers, seniors and company executives, and make continuous progress under pressure. So, most trainees are obedient, polite and hardworking children. Before the debut of the company is based on the needs of the combination of each idol to formulate a person; even if the person is not consistent with the idol's character, they also need to be in accordance with the requirements of the company to disguise. After their debut, idols also need to obey the company's arrangements for business and attendance at events. If they break the company's rules, they have to pay a high penalty. In recent years, more and more underage idols have been born due to the acceleration of the updating and iteration of Korean idol groups. For example, six of the seven members of YG Entertainment's newest girl group Baby Monster are minors. The average age of the group is 15, and the youngest member is 13. For brokerage companies, underage idols are easier to manage or control due to their relatively weak social and personal experience while having stronger personal plasticity. But in the absence of independent cognition and self-protection ability, it is not necessarily a good thing for minors to enter the entertainment industry at an early age.

3.2. The Politicization of Korean Idols

The relationship between K-pop and politics should not be ignored. In 1998, Kim Dae-jung was elected president of South Korea and established the strategy of "building a nation through culture". Kim Dae-jung's nephew, Kim Young-wook, founded SM Entertainment with Lee. In the same year, SM introduced its idol groups H.O.T and S.E.S to China and Japan, and the Korean Wave became

popular. Therefore, K-pop could not be separated from the government's policy support from the beginning of its development, and it contained political tasks. In recent years, K-pop has gradually developed to the world, and some Korean dramas and variety shows have been widely spread worldwide, which shows the ambition of the Korean wave to become the representative of Asian culture. And South Korea has a penchant for star diplomacy. In 2017, Song Hye-kyo and EXO attended the China-ROK economic and trade exchange meeting and accompanied Moon Jae-in on his visit to China. In the same year, SHINee member Minho accompanied then-U.S. First lady Melania Trump to a regular promotional event for the East Olympic Games. In 2018, Red Velvet traveled to Pyongyang, North Korea for a peace performance. When President Moon hosted President Trump in South Korea in 2019, EXO went to the presidential office to present Trump and his daughter with autographed albums. In 2022, BTS was invited to the White House to meet with Biden. It may seem absurd that celebrities represent the country, but the Korean government intends to turn K-pop idols into doves of diplomatic peace and weapons when necessary. The politicization of idols will make idolatry no longer the quintessential entertainment. Because when it comes to the national level, fans in different countries will inevitably choose different political sides, and idols staying away from politics can effectively avoid unnecessary disputes [11]. In most cases, the development of the political line of idols will lead to the inevitable behavior of "entrainment of private goods". When idols express opinions on specific political issues, their fans are more likely to adopt their idols' opinions, even if they are incorrect.

3.3. The Emergence of Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Theft

Nowadays, national soft power competition has become an important part of international competition [12]. Culture is one of the core resources and main sources of a country's soft power. In this international context, the Korean government put forward the policy of "building a nation through culture" at the end of the last century [13]. As a former vassal state of China, a colony of Japan, and now a country where American troops are stationed, it is undoubtedly difficult for South Korea to establish a nation by relying on its own independent culture. As a result, some Koreans want to enhance their national self-confidence by reconstructing history and appropriating culture. Their formula is to blur Chinese culture into Asian culture and then subtly transform it into Korean culture. Among these cultural theft cases, one cannot be ignored is the K-pop idols, who are increasingly becoming the showmen and spokesmen for Korea's cultural appropriation. This has become a potential problem for South Korea's strategy of "building a nation through culture". Such acts did not carry much weight in the early days when no celebrity endorsements existed. But in recent years, as k-pop idols have gone global, the South Korean government has found it easier to exploit their fame and influence for cultural appropriation and spread it worldwide. As a result, more and more K-pop idols have become tools of cultural appropriation. For example, the hairpin of popular Korean idol Jang Won Young recently caused a lot of discussion and controversy. She claimed in an interview video that the Chinese hairpins were Korean in style, but after Internet users in China verified them, they were found to be in the style of a traditional phoenix hairpin and made in Shaanxi, China. So, there's no question that this is an act of cultural appropriation. However, some entertainment industry professionals who watched the full video pointed out that Jang was reading a draft at the time. This also shows that many Korean idols lack autonomy and risk awareness. If she had understood the manuscript before shooting it, had some thoughts of her own, and replaced the words, it would not have caused so much controversy and abuse. The paradox of this case is that people tend to accept the arguments of celebrities and Key Opinion Leaders (KOLS) because they generally represent a higher voice in society. In this case, the unique culture of one country will become exclusive to other countries without realizing it.

In recent years, with the conflict of economic interests and the competition of cultural soft power between China and South Korea, "anti-South Korea" remarks and events have emerged one after another [14]. However, this has not stopped K-pop idols from frequently appearing in China's trending searches and sparking discussion, and many groups have come to Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan for world concert Tours. The entire K-pop community was barely materially affected. Because in terms of geographical location and economic relations, the mutually beneficial relationship between China and South Korea is always present and important. In addition, all the major entertainment companies in South Korea have the involvement of Chinese capital, and the capital also needs to profit from it.

4. Conclusion

With the development of economic globalization, K-pop culture has developed from the mid-1990s to the present. It is not only a minority culture, but directly and indirectly drives the economic development of South Korea, which also implies intangible political and economic benefits. As an important part of South Korea's soft power, the Korean Wave has enhanced South Korea's national image and international status. The development of new media and the spread and popularity of K-pop culture, which supports the night market, is becoming more and more widespread in China. The Korean government's strategy of "building a nation through culture" is the fundamental reason why K-pop can continue to grow and become competitive.

Undoubtedly, there are some problems in the spread and development of Korean Wave culture in China. K-pop has become a part of fans' lives, and the culture, politics and values it conveys have influenced their ideas, behaviors and lifestyles every moment. This has both positive and negative effects. The positive information in K-pop can give people emotional value, release the pressure in life, and understand more diverse cultures. On the other hand, too much exposure to negative information about K-pop can lead to blind worship, hedonism and political error. Moreover, due to their young age, lack of subjective initiative and weak self-awareness, many popular idols are easy to be controlled by brokerage companies or used by people with intentions to become tools for cultural appropriation or to promote political positions.

Therefore, how to face K-pop with the right attitude is very important. The most fundamental is to cultivate the ability of independent judgment, to establish a correct outlook on life, values and world. People should not only respect the traditional culture of Korea, but also maintain the traditional culture of their own country. As an important source of information for people to contact Korean pop culture, new media has an inescapable responsibility. Therefore, relevant departments should strengthen the supervision, management, and maintenance of mass media, check information well and guide public opinion correctly.

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