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REWRITING THE HISTORY OF K-POP: FANDOM ACTIVISM FROM THE LOCAL TO THE TRANSLOCAL

Abstract

This study re-examines the history of K-pop from the audience's perspective, focusing on the fandom activism of K-pop fans. This study differentiates itself from existing historical accounts of K-pop, which have been primarily framed through industrial or policy-oriented perspectives. It aims to re-evaluate audiences as active agents in the production of K-pop culture, illustrate the interrelationship between the global and local, and assess the cultural and political potential of K-pop fandom.

This study applies the concepts of locality and translocality to trace the evolution of K-pop fandom activism across three historical phases. The first phase corresponds to the formative stage of locality in the mid-to-late 1990s, the second represents the consolidating stage of locality from the late 1990s to the early 2010s, and the third marks the transition toward translocality from the mid-2010s to the present.

Through this analysis, the study identifies several key findings. Fandom has increasingly emerged as a central agent in the formation of K-pop culture. The formation and circulation of K-pop fandom activism demonstrate the reciprocal interpenetration between the global and the local. Furthermore, K-pop culture is becoming a means of reconfiguring global cultural power relationships. These findings suggest that K-culture constitutes a networked space characterized by

ongoing hybridity and transversal movement and holds the potential for transnational solidarity oriented toward translocality.

1. Introduction

Korean popular culture has spread worldwide as "K-culture." It spans a range of domains, including television dramas, film, webtoons, games, beauty, fashion, food, and lifestyle, creating a complex and multifaceted flow. Particularly, the development of digital platforms and global streaming environments has accelerated the cross-border circulation of Korean popular cultural content, dramatically expanding the visibility and accessibility of the Korean cultural industry. Hence, South Korea is no longer a regional site of cultural production; it is one of the central currents within the global cultural market. Although the influence of K-culture cannot be equated with the dominance of American popular culture, one cannot find comparable cases within non-Western cultural contexts that have generated a counter-flow to Western popular culture, which makes K-culture a phenomenon worthy of attention.

This article focuses on K-pop. The fandoms of K-pop idol groups, represented by BTS ARMY and BLACKPINK BLINK, are distributed across the globe. Subsequent idol groups consistently occupy top positions on the Billboard charts and on Spotify and YouTube streaming metrics. It is common for these groups to pursue global commercial success based on an already-branded image of K-pop. Additionally, the consecutive successes of Rosé and Bruno Mars' collaborative song, APT., in 2024 and Golden, the theme song of the Netflix film K-pop Demon Hunters, in 2025, further confirmed K-pop's current global standing.

There are various interpretations of the factors that have established K-pop's distinct position within global music charts. These include the development of the Korean entertainment industry; advancements in digital technologies, such as smartphones; transformations in digital platforms, including social media and OTT services; and effective governmental support policies. These elements have interacted with one another and contributed significantly to the expansion of K-pop. However, focusing exclusively on these factors risks producing a fragmented understanding of the cultural phenomena on a global scale. It may lead to the misconception that the formation and circulation of popular culture are driven solely by producers or producing nations. Hence, it requires an expanded analytical perspective capable of identifying the agents who actively propel and sustain cultural phenomena.

This article focuses on the practices of K-pop fandom. By examining fandom's characteristics, culture, and political roles, it arrives at a more multi-layered and structural explanation of the K-pop phenomenon. In other words, the global diffusion of K-pop cannot be reduced to the outcomes of industrial systems or technological

conditions. It has been continuously reconfigured through active meaning-making by fandoms as agents of action. As consumers, interpreters, and practical mediators, fans play a central role in expanding K-pop beyond a national cultural commodity into a transnational cultural practice. This calls for a shift in analytical focus from production-centered views toward the dimensions of reception and practice, while providing a theoretical foundation for understanding K-pop as a contemporary global popular cultural phenomenon.

To analyze the nature and role of K-pop fandom more concretely, this study examines "fandom activism." Fandom activism represents a particularly salient site for examining how fans intervene in cultural, social, and political issues as a collective subject and how they carry out visible practices within the public sphere, since such activism is grounded in collective action and relational networks (Jenkins/ Shresthova 2012). In other words, analyzing fandom activism explains how fandom's internal culture, network structures, affective bonds, and media strategies together form the K-pop culture.

Hence, this article examines the origins, development, and modes of expansion of K-pop fandom activism for a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary K-pop phenomenon. While numerous studies have described the history of K-pop from industrial or policy-oriented perspectives, attempts to narrate this history from the audience's perspective remain scarce. In response to this gap, this study reconstructs the history of K-pop fandom, focusing on activism practices. It begins with Korean popular culture in the 1990s, before the complete emergence of K-pop, when the foundations for modern fandom practices were first established. It traces the process through which K-pop fandom developed its distinctive modes of expression. It demonstrates how K-pop fandom activism, through globalization, has been re-localized in forms that differ from those of earlier periods.

This study re-examines audiences as central agents in the production of K-pop culture. Moreover, following Stuart Hall's argument, it examines K-pop culture as a site where the global and the local are continuously interpenetrated (Hall 1997a: 62). It assesses the cultural-political potential that popular culture audiences, including K-pop fandom, may possess. With its findings, this study challenges producer-centered perspectives on popular culture and enables a renewed understanding of K-culture. Moreover, concerning the expansion of global capitalism, it offers a way to conceptualize locality as an alternative. Hence, this study is an attempt to explore what Arjun Appadurai (2000: 3) described as "globalization from below."

Chapter 2 introduces the concepts of locality and translocality as a conceptual framework for distinguishing the characteristics of K-pop fandom activism across historical periods. Building on this framework, Chapter 3 discusses the history of K-pop fandom activism, with locality as its central analytical lens. The overall trajectory is divided into three stages. Each stage is examined with particular attention to the shifting characteristics of activism, especially changes in its targets of

resistance and modes of interaction.

2. K-pop Fandom Activism from the Perspective of Locality Studies

In this study, locality denotes a relational construct that is continuously formed through the intersection and interaction of social relationships and processes within a community (Massey 1991: 138–139). Hence, the concept encompasses relational networks among communities constituted based on peripheral positions or identities. Appadurai refused to limit locality to a geographical space or a quantitative category. He understood locality as a fundamentally relational and contextual phenomenon. That is, locality is a relational construct produced through shared sensibilities regarding social issues, interaction skills, and interdependencies among diverse contexts, instead of being a fixed attribute of physical space. Thus, locality is a phenomenological quality, produced and sustained through the practices, collaborations, and conflicts of community members. In other words, it is a socially produced outcome and a constitutive aspect of social life (Appadurai 1996: 178–179). Moreover, such locality can function as a discursive site that resists narratives imposed from above (Hall 1997b: 64).

Fandom represents the manifestation of a shared feeling within a historical and social context. According to Mark Duffett, fandom is neither a simple aggregation of fans nor a concept reducible to a place or an object. Instead, it is a mode and function of cultural creativity that encompasses affective attachment to fan objects, identities, and a range of related practices (Duffett 2013: 17–18). Hence, fandom can be regarded as a form of locality, as it functions as a field of cultural practice. By collectively sharing and representing affective experiences and organizing cultural and social identities that transcend individual taste, fandom forms and sustains its locality.

Appadurai particularly emphasized the role of the local subject in the production of locality. A local subject refers to an agent embedded within a community who constructs identity through participation in social networks. Through distinctive rituals, rites of passage, and local knowledge, such subjects localize time and space. These practices enable individuals to concretely experience their lifeworld and provide the foundation for the formation of identity (Appadurai 1996: 179–182). Similarly, fans assume the role of local subjects within fandom through active practices. They establish relationships with fan objects or texts, appropriate meanings, and reproduce content (Duffett 2013: 165–190). John Fiske (2011: 83) argued that the production of meaning by popular culture audiences constituted a process of subject formation within society. As Fiske suggested, the act of textual appropriation positioned individuals within fandom and inscribed upon them their identity as fans. For fans, such practices functioned as both ritual and rite of passage. Their new information and interpretations of fan objects become "local knowledge," through which new

local subjects are generated.

The formation of locality through the practices of local subjects is closely connected to the establishment of neighborhoods. If locality is understood as a phenomenological quality constituted through social relationships and practices, the neighborhood represents the embodied form of that locality. The neighborhood is a communal mode of existence characterized by concrete experience and the potential for social reproduction. Processes of production, representation, and reproduction, in which local subjects participate, expand the scope of the neighborhood and may give rise to new neighborhoods (Appadurai 1996: 182–188). Additionally, virtual neighborhoods grounded in media and network infrastructures transcend physical boundaries by exchanging information, symbols, and economic resources and organizing social connections, exercising influence comparable to tangible neighborhoods. Hence, even small communities located at the periphery gain self-representation opportunities. However, Appadurai (1996: 194–198) noted that virtual neighborhoods simultaneously contained utopian possibilities and dystopian risks.

Fan communities explore their positions, imagine alternatives, and share new insights with other members through images and ideas derived from fan objects (Jenkins 2006: 60). They constitute social networks of mutually interacting individuals (Duffett 2013: 244). However, in reinforcing fandom as a form of locality, they perform the functions of neighborhoods. Particularly, the internet radically transformed fandom as a phenomenon and facilitated the activities of fan communities (Duffett 2013: 253). Presently, fan communities exhibit a strong character as virtual neighborhoods, expanding their influence primarily within online environments. Hence, fandom operates as a form of locality, while fans, as local subjects, generate locality through diverse practices. By forming communities that take on the characteristics of neighborhoods, especially virtual neighborhoods grounded in digital media and networked environments, fans actively sustain and reproduce locality. These observations provide a basis for conceptualizing fandom as a form of locality.

Recent K-pop fandom activism has increasingly taken on translocal characteristics. Arif Dirlik argued that under contemporary conditions dominated by global capitalism, local resistance must orient toward translocality in order to carry political significance. In other words, while locality may serve as the starting point of resistance, it is not sufficient on its own. Effective resistance must extend beyond individual localities and unfold through conscious and practical solidarity among multiple localities. Thus, translocal awareness and action are indispensable conditions for resisting the global capitalist system (Dirlik 1996: 40). Accordingly, translocality, as articulated by Dirlik, can be understood as a form of political praxis generated at points of solidarity among localities.

One of the objectives of this article is to locate such translocal potential within K-pop fandom activism. As discussed, it traces the process through which K-pop fandom, once constituted as a form of locality, has come to operate as a wide-ranging translocal formation and examines the possibilities and meanings of this transformation. Hence, the following chapter examines South Korean society in the 1990s. During this period, Korea experienced cultural turbulence marked by the easing of social tensions, rapid transformations in the media environment, and the emergence of new sensibilities, content, and celebrity figures. Simultaneously, suppressed cultural desires among the public began to surface, creating conditions for the accumulation of internal dynamics that would drive the rise of K-pop and the broader phenomenon of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) (Ahn 2022: 87–113). Furthermore, Chapter 3 explains the formation and evolution of K-pop fandom activism. It examines the formation of K-pop fandom in the 1990s, focusing on the process through which global culture was transformed into local culture or locality. Furthermore, it analyzes how fandom, constituted as a form of locality in the 1990s, was consolidated in the early 2000s. It explores the process through which Korean forms of locality have expanded globally and were subsequently transformed into translocal ones.

3. The Formation, Consolidation, and Transformation of K-pop Fandom Activism as a Manifestation of Locality

3.1. Mid- to Late 1990s: The Formation of Locality—Localization of the Global and the Emergence of Fandom Activism

Herbert Schiller argued that the global market was becoming increasingly unified, producing hierarchies and stratifications among nations. Dominant classes or nations, he claimed, established differential relationships with subordinate ones, generating exploitation. Cultural imperialism operated within this global structure, as cultural communication and technology met the needs of dominant powers and maintained the world's power hierarchy (Schiller 2017: 5–6).

While Schiller's perspective does not fully capture the multidirectional and hybridized flows of contemporary global culture, it partly explains the transformations of the South Korean popular music market in the 1990s, which was influenced by West-led global culture. During this decade, Korean popular culture underwent intense transformation. In 1989, overseas travel restrictions were lifted. Following the normalization of diplomatic relationships between Korea and China in 1992, cultural exchanges flourished. The Kim Young-sam administration launched the *Segyehwa* (Globalization) policy in 1993, promoting large-scale liberalization of the cultural market and the internationalization of Korean cultural production. The lifting of restrictions on the broadcasting of foreign music in 1994 and the spread of cable TV in 1995 brought foreign popular culture into Korean homes. Furthermore, the

official opening of Japanese popular culture in 1998 exposed Korean audiences to a range of external cultural influences.

Within this scenario, global musical trends flooded Korea. The public sought new and diverse genres, and young musicians actively responded by incorporating foreign musical styles. For instance, Seo Taiji and Boys gained immense popularity by experimenting with global genres, including rap, soul, rock and roll, techno, punk, and hardcore (Shim 2006: 36). However, the cultural influx was not limited to Western culture centered on the United States. During the 1990s, Korean producers and musicians actively benchmarked Japanese popular music (J-pop). Pioneering entertainment companies, such as SM Entertainment, adopted Japan's idol production system and localized it within the Korean context. This led to the emergence of H.O.T., widely regarded as the first K-pop idol group. Nonetheless, plagiarism of Japanese songs by some musicians became a social controversy in the late 1990s (Jin 2020: 48–49). However, one might interpret the 1990s Korean pop music industry as having been absorbed into the global system dominated by the United States and Japan, with Korea functioning as a semi-peripheral or peripheral cultural space. In other words, this could be considered the phase of cultural imperialism. However, this study approaches cultural change as globalization from below. Therefore, it examines the reception of global culture in Korea, which reveals the active and creative practices of local audiences, who appropriated global forms to construct new modes of locality.

In the 1990s, teenagers and young adults in their 20s emerged as the focus of the so-called "New Generation" (*sin sedae*) discourse. They were the first post-war generation to possess purchasing power and consumer agency, actively engaging with popular culture according to their tastes and individuality. As an "emergent culture," their practices shaped a new structure of feeling and challenged the "dominant culture" of the older generation (Williams 1977: 121–127). They enthusiastically consumed imported music and its localized derivatives, expressing their generational distinction and identity through global sensibilities and consumer-oriented practices (Kim 2021: 307–308). However, they were not passive recipients of the global cultural capital that defined their consumption patterns. They actively used global culture as a resource to form unprecedented large-scale taste communities in Korea, that is, self-organized, autonomous collectives based on shared cultural preferences. This phenomenon stemmed from voluntary and independent initiatives rather than industrial intervention. For example, the formation and management of the Seo Taiji and Boys' fan club occurred outside the cultural industry, establishing the prototype of the later K-pop fandom.

The global culture that infiltrated Korean society did not consist solely of cultural products from the core nations. According to Schiller, dominant powers developed and disseminated communication technologies to maintain global hierarchies. For instance, the rise of personal computer (PC) communication (*PC-tongsin*) became central to Korean youth culture in the mid-1990s as part of a broader imperial

globalization of communication technology. *PC-tongsin* referred to Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), a network service that enabled communication between personal computers via dial-up connections, serving as a major online platform before the World Wide Web (WWW). The first such service in Korea, *H-mail*, was launched by Korea Data Communication in 1987. By 1992, multiple companies competed in this field. BBS networks were popularized nationwide under the umbrella term *PC-tongsin*, forming the infrastructural base for diverse cultural activities (Kim and Cho 2017: 5–33).

The majority of *PC-tongsin* users were in their teens and 20s. They organized countless online communities around shared interests, exchanged information, organized offline gatherings, and constructed their identities through taste-based interaction. Hence, for the first time, virtual neighborhoods based on shared interests emerged nationwide. Korean cultural theorist Jeong Yoonsu argued that the origins of today's internet-based media culture can be traced to these early online communities. The cultural practices of *PC-tongsin* users in the 1990s laid the foundations for diverse online cultural phenomena that define the present digital media environment (Jeong 2020: 255–295). For instance, one of the most popular *PC-tongsin* services, Hitel, hosted Ttorane, the official online fan club of Seo Taiji and Boys. Its members led online discussions and expanded the fandom's influence through active digital communication (Lee and Son 2003: 369–372). Similarly, the H.O.T. fandom, considered the first K-pop idol group, built a massive online community through *PC-tongsin* platforms, forming a grassroots social collective that exerted significant influence on the Korean popular music industry.

Furthermore, in the 1990s, South Korean music audiences shaped new identities through global cultural flows. Through emerging global networks, they systematized fandom communities. While they often displayed compliance and consumption of the global cultural industry, they cultivated and shared unique interaction techniques and modes of sensing sociocultural issues. Hence, they localized global elements and generated new forms of locality. This emergent locality materialized as concrete activism, most notably the "Performance Ethics Committee Struggle." Under the pre-censorship system, music, film, and performance in South Korea were tightly controlled by the Performance Ethics Committee (*Kongyŏn yulli wiwŏnhoe*). All creative works underwent review; releasing an album without approval was illegal. The Committee dictated lyric revisions or deletions. This institutional control made the cultural production and reception process rigid.

In 1994, at the peak of their popularity, Seo Taiji and Boys released their fourth album. Among its tracks, *Sidae Yudgam* (Regret of the Times) ignited a movement to abolish the pre-censorship system. The Committee, citing concerns over the song's "anti-social" lyrics, demanded textual modification. Seo Taiji refused, deleting the vocal track and releasing an instrumental version, a symbolic act of resistance. The group's fans transformed the censorship issue into a public discourse on artistic

freedom. Centered around online communities, they constructed and circulated counter-narratives, exerted pressure on legacy media outlets, such as newspapers and broadcasters, and organized a collective action campaign, writing letters to members of the National Assembly to voice their opposition. Their activism prompted the opposition party to establish a parliamentary inquiry into the matter. This led to formal legislative discussions, and in 1996, the pre-censorship system was abolished (Dong-A Ilbo 1996: 25). This event, widely referred to as the "Performance Ethics Committee Struggle," was the first instance of fandom activism in South Korea. It represented a manifestation of locality, as it constituted a resistance to the globalization of Western music and global capitalist expansion, as well as the nation-state's regulatory control over popular culture. The fans who led this movement functioned as local subjects, producing a resistant public discourse. Hence, as K-pop idol groups and fandoms emerged, fandom activism grew stronger, more organized, and translocal.

3.2. Late 1990s–Early 2010s: The Consolidation of Locality—Systematization of K-pop Fandom Activism

Appadurai viewed neighborhoods as inherently oppositional and marked by alterity. They were produced against existing social and environmental foundations and were "colonized" spaces. In this process of production, power relationships were exercised over other neighborhoods (Appadurai 1996: 182–187). This description suggested that neighborhoods came into being primarily through domination. However, when fandom communities were conceived as neighborhoods, one observed an inverse dynamic—neighborhoods were generated through the challenges posed by the subaltern and those who resisted power structures.

The resistant practices of fandoms, as othered neighborhoods, can be understood through Axel Honneth's notion of the struggle for recognition (1995: 29). As discussed, the locality of fandom, established by the fans of Seo Taiji and Boys, was inherited and strengthened by the fans of subsequent idol groups. However, the primary targets of fandom activism shifted. Seo Taiji and Boys' fans expressed their activism through resistance to state control and creative, autonomous transformations of global culture. In contrast, K-pop fandoms, from the late 1990s to around 2010, exhibited resistance primarily against the power structures of the cultural industry. Although they sometimes cooperated or aligned with the industry, they adopted strategic attitudes to assert their autonomy and seek recognition for their cultures. Hence, the locality of K-pop fandom acquired a more distinct and differentiated character.

Cultural studies scholar Kim Seong-min, who conducted comparative research on Japan and South Korea, argued that the distinct characteristics of K-pop fandom began to crystallize with the rise of H.O.T.'s fandom, Club H.O.T. They displayed notable features, such as nationwide organization, close coordination with entertainment agencies, and devoted fan activities. Seong-min emphasized that Club H.O.T. was the first fandom to visually and aurally symbolize its collective identity through

designated fan color, cheering tools, and standardized chants (Kim 2018: 49–51). The organizational model and communication system established by Club H.O.T. between artists, management, and fans continued to exert a significant influence on contemporary K-pop fandom structures.

Initially, H.O.T.'s fans were scattered nationwide in small, independent groups. Recognizing the need for a systematic fan management structure, SM Entertainment consolidated these groups through its agency partner, Starworld. Starworld, in 1997, officially launched Club H.O.T. by integrating 32 informal fan clubs into a unified national organization (Kim 2009: 81–82). The fandom established regional chapters, with local presidents and executives, holding regular meetings to organize events, coordinate activities, and foster solidarity among regional fan groups. Simultaneously, fans participated in the official club and hundreds of unofficial online fan communities, where they shared photographs, schedules, and information about the members, engaging in real-time discussions and social interaction through chat platforms (Hwang 1999: 28–30). The organized practices of Club H.O.T. were particularly visible through its self-produced fanzine, which functioned as a communication medium and a record of fan culture. While Starworld oversaw production and distribution, the fan club's editorial committee handled editorial planning and content creation. These editors conducted interviews with H.O.T. members, curated fan-submitted photographs, creative writing, and artwork from across the country, and compiled schedules and event reports for the publication (Club H.O.T. 1998–2000).

Critically, one might interpret the absorption of a spontaneously formed fandom into an official organization as a manifestation of cultural industry control. However, fans developed multilayered strategies to preserve their autonomy within this structure. Through systematic organization, fandoms acquired social capital to negotiate and interact with artists, agencies, and rival fandoms, both cooperating and competing. This was a symbiotic process in which entertainment companies pursued economic profit, while fandoms sought cultural identity and participatory agency through fan activities, driven by shared yet asymmetrical goals.

In the 2000s, K-pop fandom's sense of locality became increasingly systematized and concretized. The technological shift in online network systems from BBS to the WWW was a pivotal turning point. With the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan for the Advancement of High-Speed Information Networks under President Kim Dae-jung's administration in 2001, PCs and high-speed internet access rapidly spread across South Korea (Oh 2001: 19–23). Hence, *PC-tongsin* declined, and the digital sphere reorganized around the web. This represented a paradigm shift in Korean society and was instrumental in establishing its long-standing reputation as an internet powerhouse. It provided the social and infrastructural context for why activism emerged within K-pop fandoms with exceptional speed, density, and organizational stability compared to other localities.

The modes of expansion, connection, and production within fandoms evolved dramatically as they migrated into the WWW. Internet-based homepages and communities, far more accessible and universal than *PC-tongsin* clubs, revolutionized communication while dramatically lowering entry barriers. This led to a surge in membership, transforming fandoms into large, highly interactive collectives. Empowered by advanced interaction technologies and vast digital networks, fans exchanged and negotiated ideas about their idols, industry structures, and broader social issues with unprecedented dynamism. Consequently, their activism grew more organized and strategic, expanding their societal influence. Through these strengthened digital networks, K-pop fandom communities engaged directly with the power structures of the cultural industry. Particularly, struggles emerged around decision-making authority in the relationships between agencies and artists, and agencies and fans. Three major events represent K-pop fandom activism during this period, highlighting their cultural and social impact.

The first was the protest against the disbandment of H.O.T. In May 2001, when negotiations over contract renewal and profit distribution between the group and its agency, SM Entertainment, broke down, disbandment was announced. In response, hundreds of fans gathered in front of SM's headquarters in Cheongdam-dong, Seoul, to demand that the decision be withdrawn (Chosun Ilbo 2001). They expressed their demands and emotions through fan clubs and media websites (Korea JoongAng Daily 2003). This marked a turning point in how fandoms were socially perceived; they were not just consumers but collective stakeholders.

The second involved fandom activism surrounding TVXQ's disbandment and contract dispute. In July 2009, three of the group's members, Kim Jaejoong, Kim Junsu, and Park Yuchun, filed an injunction to suspend the validity of their exclusive contracts with SM Entertainment, halting their activities. In response, the fandom organized collective actions online. They launched petitions on major sites opposing the disbandment and sent mass emails to news outlets to represent TVXQ's position (Yonhap News Agency 2009). Although the group had disbanded, in 2013, the Korea Fair Trade Commission ordered SM Entertainment to cease its unlawful practices toward the members (Korea Herald 2013). This brought the issue of so-called "slave contracts," long normalized within the entertainment industry, into mainstream public debate.

The third was the 2009 protest against the withdrawal of 2PM member Jay Park. In September 2009, Jay Park was forced to leave the group after old online posts criticizing Korea surfaced. About 1,500 members of the group's fan club, Hottest, staged a silent protest outside JYP Entertainment, demanding his reinstatement (K Bites 2009). Fans declared a boycott of 2PM's activities following Jay Park's expulsion from the group. However, Jay Park's contract was terminated, deepening the conflict between the fandom and the agency (Korea Times 2010). This demonstrated how the absence of communication rapidly eroded trust among fans, entertainment

companies, and idols.

From 2000 to the early 2010s, numerous examples of activism, reflecting the locality of K-pop fandom, emerged. These movements showed how fans' modes of civic participation, communication, and agenda expression became increasingly systematized and formalized. The development of online communities enabled fans to mobilize instantly, massively, and simultaneously in response to sudden events. As media grew more complex and global fandoms emerged, K-pop's locality shifted toward translocality.

3.3. Mid-2010s to the Present: The Transition to the Translocal—Globalization and Translocalization of K-pop Fandom Activism

In 2006, Henry Jenkins proclaimed the arrival of the era of convergence culture in his seminal work. By "convergence," he referred to the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the collaboration among diverse media industries, and the migratory behavior of audiences who moved freely and transversally across these platforms. In such an era of convergence, all media interacted dynamically, and the power balance between producers and consumers shifted unpredictably. Through participatory cultural practices, audiences consumed and produced content across various media and platforms. Hence, media circulation depended on active consumers (Jenkins 2008: 1–4).

The K-pop industry has proactively embraced the diversification of digital media and social networking services (SNS). Numerous scholars have analyzed how K-pop strategically utilized new media platforms to bypass the traditional global distribution systems dominated by Western record labels, allowing it to reach international audiences directly and establish itself as a new form of global popular culture (Oh/Lee 2013: 34–58; Parc/Kawashima 2018: 23–48). Hence, the industry's rapid adaptation to the digital paradigm shift served as a crucial factor behind K-pop's worldwide success.

K-pop's industrial strategies evolved, and its fandom's communication structures and participatory modes transformed. The advent of smartphones dramatically enhanced the mobility of fans as local subjects, while the widespread SNS adoption enabled interactions that transcended time and space. YouTube, particularly, became a venue for fans' content reproduction and a community organized around shared aesthetic and emotional tastes. These environmental changes provided the foundation for K-pop fandom localities to expand beyond their original borders, facilitating their diffusion into the global sphere. The most notable example of K-pop companies' strategic responsiveness and fandoms' participatory culture is the interaction between BTS and their fandom, ARMY. Even before their official debut in 2013, BTS shared extensive self-produced content through YouTube and Vlogs, fostering active communication with fans. In response, ARMY engaged in multilayered participation that extended beyond conventional fan activities in the digital sphere. This included

daily interactions and reciprocal exchanges, forming affective bonds and collective emotions. Simultaneously, they engaged in active content reproduction, including music video interpretations, translations, reaction videos, cover dances, and fan-made merchandise. Through self-organized networks, they carried out streaming parties, hashtag campaigns, and global promotional initiatives, achieving large-scale collective mobilization.

Scholars have noted that such practices by ARMY expanded the cultural meanings of BTS's content and facilitated the transnational circulation of its image and cultural capital (Chang/Park 2019: 260–287; Ju 2019: 19–33; McLaren/Jin 2020: 100–127). From Appadurai's perspective, ARMY, as a local subject, disseminated BTS-related "local knowledge," creating the conditions for generating new local subjects across regions. The processes of content production and reproduction expanded the boundaries of the fandom community as a neighborhood, giving rise to a new global ARMY neighborhood. Hence, distinctive forms of cultural participation and communication that characterized K-pop fandom were extended, diffused, and replicated. K-pop audiences outside Korea shared the communicative and participatory practices once unique to Korean fan communities. Therefore, a globalization of locality took place.

However, some scholars, following Appadurai's concerns, have interpreted the expansion of K-pop culture as "colonization." Gooyong Kim argued that K-pop's popularity abroad amounted to an indirect consumption of American pop music disguised as "Korean," which should be understood as Korea's subordination within an American neoliberal capitalist model (Kim 2017: 2379–2380). Therefore, it is a "recolonization of the colony." This view is valid to the extent that K-pop's globalization operates within global capitalism and aligns with the goals of the Korean cultural industry. However, fans and audiences consume culture in ways that diverge from industry prescriptions. Through highly developed media and network environments, they construct a collective intelligence and generate new cultural meanings through their creativity and agency. In several countries, K-pop audiences have recontextualized the genre within their cultural frameworks, transforming fandom practices into forms of activism. This recalls how Korea's new generation youth in the 1990s actively appropriated elements of global culture to form distinctive tastes, cultures, and fandom-based localities. Hence, following the globalization of locality, a relocalization is taking place.

For instance, in 2020, the United States fans protested against racial discrimination with a no-show campaign at Trump's Tulsa rally (Belam 2020). In 2021, Chilean supporters of Gabriel Boric utilized K-pop fan media for political outreach (Yim 2021). In 2024, Taiwan's Bluebird Movement adopted K-pop symbols for protest and solidarity (Wu 2025). These cases show K-pop's transformation into political capital through global fan engagement. As K-pop fandoms are relocalized within different socio-cultural contexts, they become interconnected through shared practices and mutual recognition. This corresponds to what Dirlik conceptualized as

the emergence of the translocal, a form of conscious and practical solidarity among localities. Translocality provides the foundation for resisting the colonization of local spaces by global capitalism and the nation-state. Hence, K-pop fandom exemplifies a translocal formation, uniting fans across borders through shared affects and collective engagement with local and global issues.

A notable case of this translocal activism is the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. George Floyd's 2020 murder propelled BLM into a global movement against racial and systemic oppression. In solidarity, BTS issued a public statement on X (previously Twitter) condemning racism and, together with Big Hit Entertainment, donated USD 1 million to the BLM Foundation. Within 24 hours, ARMY matched the donation. According to Forbes, the campaign demonstrated the scale and organization of global fandom activism (Rolli 2020). Similarly, the 2021 Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar highlighted how K-pop fandoms operated as translocal agents of activism. On February 1, 2021, a military coup plunged Myanmar into a state of emergency marked by widespread arrests, detentions, and severe restrictions on media and assembly. In response, civil servants, workers, and students initiated a nationwide CDM. Within this volatile context, K-pop fandoms emerged as visible actors in local resource mobilization and information dissemination. For instance, EXO member Kai's fandom provided food supplies to protesters, while BLACKPINK fans donated approximately USD 4,000 to the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). Meanwhile, K-pop fandoms globally amplified local resistance by participating in hashtag campaigns that shared real-time updates on casualties and protest conditions, enhancing the visibility and reach of political information (Gan 2021). K-pop fandom's activism within Myanmar's CDM illustrated a fusion of digital literacy, rapid mobilization skills, and global fan networks, forming a concrete case of translocality in action.

The 2025 Indonesia protests highlighted the evolving translocal dynamics of K-pop fandom activism. Beginning in Jakarta, the protests were triggered by economic discontent and opposition to parliamentary privilege. The demonstrations soon evolved beyond economic grievances, expressing a broader frustration with governmental insensitivity to public hardship. As tensions escalated, the president revoked privileges and reshuffled the finance and security cabinet (Karmini 2025). Hence, K-pop was used as a medium of protest and solidarity. According to interviews with local participants, as reported in Korean media, protesters adopted K-pop as an expressive form of resistance and unity. Girls' Generation's "Into the New World," previously used during the 2004 Korean impeachment protests and the 2020 Thai pro-democracy demonstrations, was sung once again in public gatherings. Additionally, "Take Down," the theme song of the 2025 globally successful Netflix animated series K-pop Demon Hunters, was used as a protest anthem. Videos documenting demonstrations accompanied by "Take Down" circulated on YouTube and TikTok, while music by EXO, Seventeen, and other K-pop artists appeared in solidarity clips

supporting the movement (News1TV 2025).

A significant player in this process was K4P (Kpop4Planet), a global climate action platform co-founded by Lee Dayeon from Korea and Nurul Sarifah from Indonesia. Built on the autonomous and participatory energy of global K-pop fandoms, K4P spearheaded transnational environmental and social campaigns (Chan 2023). On September 9, 2025, K4P's official YouTube channel released a short video titled "All Democracies Are Connected!," which explained Indonesia's protests and the role of K-pop as a mediating form of resistance. The video concluded with a statement: "As fans who love K-pop, let us show solidarity with Indonesia" (Kpop4Planet 2025). These developments underscored how media diversification and cross-platform convergence enabled K-pop fandom activism to produce new localities in different nations and regions. Each locality became interlinked through fandom-based translocal networks. K-pop's global spread will likely foster increasingly diverse and expansive translocal formations, as they hold the potential to serve as alternative public spheres and arenas of identity politics within the globalized world.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the process through which K-pop fandom activism has become translocal by dividing its development into three historical phases from the perspectives of locality studies and fandom studies. The first phase corresponded to the mid- to late 1990s, when Korean audiences actively appropriated global culture and formed a locality grounded in the Korean context. The second phase spanned from the late 1990s to the early 2010s, when fandoms, having acquired expanded networks, challenged the power structures of the cultural industry. The third phase extended from the mid-2010s to the present, during which Korean forms of activism became globalized and were subsequently re-localized within different national and regional contexts, representing translocality.

Based on this framework, the study analyzed the history of K-pop fandom activism by examining factors that shaped the configuration of locality, including changes in internal relational networks within fandoms, shifts in dominant media, and transformations in prominent idol figures. The analysis yielded the following findings. Fandom increasingly emerged as a central agent in the formation of K-pop culture. This perspective moved beyond a nationalist understanding of K-culture as something produced solely by the cultural industry or by Koreans. Instead, it foregrounded the cultural agency of audiences. Particularly, a global fandom offered insight into how the locus of agency within K-culture continued to shift and transform. Moreover, the formation and circulation of K-pop activism demonstrated that the global and the local were engaged in an ongoing reciprocal interpenetration. K-pop culture was localized within Korea before expanding globally and was re-localized within different regions. This illustrated that contemporary popular culture operated

within a structure that enabled dynamic circulation between the local and the global.

K-pop culture increasingly functioned as a means of reconfiguring relationships between producers and audiences, the global and the local, the West and the non-West, and domination and subordination, forming new cultural constellations. Hence, K-culture can be understood as a networked space characterized by continuous hybridity and transversal movement, with the potential for transnational solidarity oriented toward translocality. The significance of this study lies in its re-examination of the history of K-pop as a history of its audiences. Moreover, it holds scholarly value as it clarifies the meanings of the continually transforming and expanding K-pop phenomenon in the contemporary context. This article would contribute to the formation of new perspectives on K-pop and K-culture.

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