04

Social media platform features and artist-fan engagement in K-pop phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

Characterized by a highly disciplined, well-researched, and extremely coordinated music production business, K-pop as a worldwide phenomenon is mainly due to dedicated fan bases, where there is a strong sense of community among artists and other fans. However, the novel coronavirus pandemic in 2020/2021 shut down concerts and any in-person events regarding fan-artist interactions, which put many challenges in an industry that heavily relies on fan engagement. The main objective of this study was to seek to answer the following question: How might K-pop labels implement efficient ways to reinforce fan-artist connections during current pandemic conditions? It was possible to find multiple ways agents can interact to contribute to the K-pop phenomenon. The formation of fandoms creates synchronized video watching, sharing, and reviewing in a record amount of time, viralizing artists' videos. Such interactions can influence the amount of visibility an artist/band will receive after releasing a new song and can even make passive listeners more active listeners by using K-pop-related applications. Moreover, social media features can influence watcher's engagement since it facilitates people learning a new song and the understanding for people with disabilities.

Keywords: K-pop phenomenon. social media. artist-fan engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Korean culture is now global, where food, films, music, and lifestyle have spread worldwide, and it is known as the Korean Wave (Gemtracks Beats & Instrumentals, 2021). Even though many aspects of the Korean Wave are viral in other countries, Korean pop, ultimately known as K-pop, is particularly famous around the world, making it a multi-billion-dollar industry. Characterized by a highly disciplined, well-researched, and extremely coordinated music production business, K-pop as a worldwide phenomenon is mainly due to dedicated fan bases, where there is a strong sense of community among artists and other fans (BBC Culture, 2019). However, the novel coronavirus pandemic in 2020 shut down concerts and any in-person events regarding fan-artist interactions, which put many challenges in an industry that heavily relies on fan engagement.

In this sense, in an attempt to better understand the impacts of the pandemic in the K-pop phenomenon, the following explanatory challenge was proposed: How might K-pop artists find innovative ways to stay connected to their fans when the pandemic has shut down in-person concerts and slowed the entertainment industry? This initial research question was later refined to the following: How might K-pop labels implement efficient ways to reinforce fan-artist connections during current pandemic conditions?

The proposed topic in this study is extremely important for the explanatory challenge of understanding fan-artist connections in K-pop during the pandemic; since after in-person events were canceled, the main form of interaction is through social media. In this sense, analyzing specific platform features related to fan engagement can contribute to a better understanding of the K-pop phenomenon, which is increasingly impacting Korean society and the overall world culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

K-pop has stood out as a rising music genre in 2012 with the viral PSY's song "Gangnam Style." Since then, K-pop music videos have become a global sensation and are breaking records for streaming on YouTube (Hajji, 2021): within minutes, reports and tweets related to K-pop bands and artists get thousands of views, likes, and shares. Currently, music video clips also get millions of views in less than a day of release, and bands like BTS and BLACKPINK are the focus of the admiration of millions of fans worldwide (Hajji, 2021). The tremendous worldwide success of K-pop can be attributed not only to the quality of the band/artist performance, but also to the efficient strategy of using social media for interaction with fans (Edlom & Karlsson, 2021). Regarding performance, one aspect that characterizes K-pop artists is that they do not just make use of their voices but their entire body: making synchronized and elaborate dance performances. This fact may have won over Korean, Asian and worldwide fans, as the visual part of the performance contributes to the success of a song in terms of its popularization and promotion.

Considering the use of social media in fan-artist interactions, the internet has changed the way the music industry connects and communicates with fans (Edlom & Karlsson, 2021). Media and entertainment companies have been using new strategies to invest and nurture their fan community, especially with the co-creation of products linked to artists (Liang & Shen, 2016). Thus, in the current globalized scenario, fans have also changed the way they get together, specifically with the formation of fandoms, which are organized agglomerations of fans that help disseminate K-pop artists' videos through sharing on social media (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021), making such videos achieve millions of views in less than a day as stated before. In this sense, the phenomenon of rapid video viralization emerges because it is more than the sum of each fan within the group supporting their favorite artist: the formation of fandoms creates synchronized video watching, sharing, and reviewing in a record amount of time, consequently, enormously popularizing the video and contributing to the K-pop phenomenon.

Fandoms members view videos of their artists and bands on YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, while commenting, liking, and sharing content (Edlom & Karlsson, 2021), which can be translated into greater or smaller reach and visibility for the artist, depending on the density of connections around where each fan is located in the fandom. For example, considering that an individual fan is a node, the edges are information sharing between each fan, and depending on the levels of density or connections of the nodes, information can spread more or less quickly, influencing the amount of visibility an artist/band will receive after the release of a new song. In addition, considering YouTube, the study by Oh & Choeh (2021) demonstrated that the components posted with performance and narrative generate a more positive engagement from viewers. At the same time, videos with audio only have a lower intensity of engagement. This finding may partly justify the great success on social media of K-pop artists and bands, with their well-prepared and synchronized presentations, as mentioned above.

Thinking further about social media helping popularize K-pop, the global-local-global process used in K-pop, proposed in study by Hajji (2021), was an essential strategy for the domination of the music charts. The study explained the use of hybridity in Korean cultural aspects with international media vehicles, in this case, YouTube, to popularize K-pop. Other important aspects mentioned by (Hajji, 2021) were the use of English in the lyrics, outstanding choreography, the use of Korean and foreign elements in the artists' look, and the use of hashtags and YouTube

subtitles. In this sense, YouTube features like subtitles for example, are extremely inclusive, influencing watcher's engagement: people that do not understand Korean can look at translations, people can learn how to sing a song seeing the lyrics and it facilitates the understanding for people with disabilities.

Moreover, the study by Kim *et al.* (2021) demonstrated that video uploads could influence high fan engagement rates by K-pop artists and bands as well as effective support from entertainment companies and the VLive app, a South Korean streaming service that allows artists to stream videos live over the internet and chat with fans in real-time. The study analyzed 289 VLive channels of K-pop artists and bands and, with the regression analysis, demonstrated that the artist's popularity also positively interferes with the channel's subscription. In this case, artist popularity would be measured as the number of followers in other social media platforms, being a quantitative discrete and independent variable in the study. Likewise, the channel's subscriptions would be the number of subscribers, being a quantitative discrete and dependent variable, since the study is looking to evaluate popularity directly affecting the number of subscribers. The study of these variables can help build specific knowledge about how popularity can spread across other platforms, essential to understanding K-pop as a worldwide phenomenon, since it is composed of multiple media vehicles.

As K-pop artists increasingly use online platforms as a way to express their personalities and communicate directly with fans around the world, the study by Kim *et al.* (2021) allows us to suggest that the use of other applications of this type, using live interaction platforms with fans, may also have contributed to the increase in the global reach of K-pop, with greater favoring of artist-fan interaction worldwide.

Another famous South Korean app currently used to host multimedia content and allow communication with fans is WeVerse, a social network that connects artists with fans, available for Android and iOS. Had & Mardianti's (2020) study cited WeVerse when discussing the relationship between such platforms and the engagement of artists and fans during the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors demonstrated that the position of music consumers shifted from passive listeners to more active listeners using the application.

The features of social media platforms influencing artist-fan engagement are studied in many ways, as described above, but only few studies are evaluating the intensity of fan attachment to K-pop artists. The study by Kwak *et al.* (2021) assessed this aspect when developing the empirical model "K-pop Online Activity Index", considering five online activities of K-pop fans: fan club membership, pay for live views, watching videos, the degree of fan club writing and the degree of watching YouTube to enhance artist value. A positive aspect was that the authors used randomized samples and identified the statistically significant online activities that determine the intensity of fans' attachment to K-pop artists, creating the empirical model that can be replicated in other studies. Although this study makes an important contribution to the literature, allowing to guide K-pop marketing companies in the use of resources more efficiently, it has a significant limitation. Data were collected from July 2019 to January 2020, before the Covid-19 pandemic. Without a doubt, companies have intensely strengthened technology and social media activities over the past two years due to the pandemic, which may invalidate the use of the study's findings in the current post-pandemic period.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It was possible to find multiple ways agents can interact to contribute to the K-pop phenomenon. The formation of fandoms creates synchronized video watching, sharing, and reviewing in a record amount of time, viralizing artists' videos. In addition, such interactions can influence the amount of visibility an artist/band will receive after releasing a new song and can even make passive listeners more active listeners by using K-pop-related applications. Moreover, social media features can influence watcher's engagement since it facilitates people learning a new song and the understanding for people with disabilities. However, some questions remain unanswered: How come platforms specifically related to K-pop, such as Vlive and Weverse are not much known by overall K-pop fans? This is one of them.

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