



## K-pop Diaspora

**Abstract** For young Korean Canadians, K-pop (Korean idol pop music) is presented not only as an ethnic media form but also as a highly global media practice. The diasporic youth’s consumption of K-pop may partly fulfill their cultural nostalgia and contribute to enhancing their ethnic ties with their ancestral homeland. Moreover, they appreciate K-pop as a global sound that is considered to be youthful, kaleidoscopic, hybrid, and relatable. While feeling ethnic and cultural affinities with K-pop, the diasporic youth engage with this genre as a cultural resource for questioning the mainstream cultural frame that takes Whiteness as a norm for granted.

**Keywords** Hallyu (The Korean Wave) · Diasporic youth · K-pop · Diasporic music · Ethnic identification · Hybridization · Fandom · Idol · BTS

On an American TV talk show in 2019, Randall Park, the star of *Fresh Off the Boat* (ABC sitcom 2015–2020) shared his experience attending a BTS concert (*The Ellen Show* 2019). The Korean American actor, who was not a fan of the group but simply accompanying his BTS fan wife, was moved by 90,000 audience members of diverse backgrounds singing along with BTS in Korean at the Rose Ball stadium. Showing a picture of himself watching the concert in tears with excitement, he said, “As a kid,

I could never imagine something like that happening. I just, I cried. (...) I am not ashamed.” Similar to Park, many diasporic Koreans have “come out” as K-pop fans after their encounter with the recent Korean Wave (or Hallyu). In Canada, University of Toronto professor Michelle Cho identified herself as a K-pop fan (especially a fan of BTS) without shame during an episode of the Canadian radio documentary show *Tapestry* (CBC Radio 2020). As a diasporic Korean who was born and raised in Chicago and now living in Toronto, Cho recalled her feelings growing up as a person of color who had to be keenly aware of her cultural difference, and thus, she welcomed the K-pop phenomenon: “Seeing Korean popular culture find mainstream success in North America, in an environment where there really aren’t many examples of Asian representation in popular culture, is moving to me in ways that I didn’t even expect.”<sup>1</sup>

As illustrated by Park’s and Cho’s comments above, the recent global K-pop phenomenon was not previously imaginable for most of the young diasporic youth interviewed for this book (and certainly not for their parents). An increasing number of people seem to “come out” and identify themselves as K-pop fans. Some K-pop fans interviewed in the early phase of this research (2015) spoke about their discomfort with publicly identifying themselves as K-pop fans due to the somewhat negative, racialized stigma attached to the music. However, as the research interviews with Korean Canadian youth progressed, it became evident that K-pop is no longer a marginal cultural taste. Not unlike many other countries, Canada has witnessed the rapid rise of K-pop since the mid- and late 2010s. In particular, with BTS’s smash hits during the pandemic period, Korean songs began to be played on Canadian national and local radio and TV. Arguably, K-pop has become an icon of global popular culture (Jin et al. 2021).

To further the previous chapters’ discussions of diasporic young people’s identity work in relation to Hallyu, this chapter specifically focuses on young Korean Canadians’ engagement with K-pop. Despite the increasing studies of global K-pop, diasporic Korean audiences have

<sup>1</sup> Despite the increasing recognition, backlash against and stigmatization of K-pop and Hallyu still exist. As a simple example, the first reader comments on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) news article reporting this *Tapestry* episode on K-pop explicitly disapproved of K-pop. The reader wrote, “They’ve ruined the kids with this garbage, why are you promoting it” (Reader comments on CBC Radio 2020, retrieved as of August 18, 2021).

been rarely researched. Korean Canadian youth engage with K-pop from their own unique audience positions equipped with bilingual and bicultural literacy—in comparison with Korea-based audiences on the one hand and overseas audiences (of non-Korean backgrounds) on the other. The Korea-based audiences may have grown up with Korean music (K-pop as a genre in particular) as a default popular music due to its continued expansion of the national music industry. According to a recent survey, the most frequently listened to music among Koreans was Korean/domestic popular music (83.6%), which was followed by Western-English (12.4%) and Japanese (2.2%) popular music (Korea Creative Content Agency 2020).<sup>2</sup> In comparison, Canada-based audiences are exposed to both Canadian and American music. In response to the strong influence of American media, Canadian media is required by the national regulator to program Canadian content for at least 35% of a popular music broadcast (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission 2002; Connolly and Iino 2017).

Because Korean Canadian youth grow up in Korean immigrant families and in Canadian public schooling, Korean Canadians may navigate between these two different national soundscapes—domestic music-dominated Korea and American music-dominated Canada. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapters, while growing up, young Canadians of Korean heritage become aware of their “second generation advantages,” which allow them to have multiple cultural and identity options (Kasinitz et al. 2008), and these advantages can be extended to the young Korean Canadians’ cultural consumption patterns. Arguably, they are neither fully in the position of Korea-based audiences nor fully in the mainstream position of White Anglo Canadian audiences, and thus, Korean Canadian youth may experience K-pop differently than both of these audiences. For diasporic youth who are equipped with bilingual and bicultural literacy and thus can navigate between Anglophone music and Korean music, K-pop is neither the mainstream music of their own locale of residence nor simply a foreign music genre. Among diasporic youth, K-pop may be signified as a *national/ethnic* (Korean) cultural genre on

<sup>2</sup> In the same survey, when answers for the two most frequently listened to music are combined, the preference for Korean popular music was even higher (95.3%), which was followed by Western-English (73.7%) and Japanese (6.5%) popular music (Korea Creative Content Agency 2020).

the one hand and re-signified as a *post-national/postmodern* cultural form on the other hand.

Diasporic Koreans (as well as diasporic Asians) may have played an important role in the growth of K-pop and its fandom in North American youth cultures (Park 2013; Yoon and Jin 2016). Given that bilingual Korean American and Korean Canadian youth may operate as early adopters and translators, further studies of young diasporic audiences are needed. This chapter begins by discussing the multiple meanings of K-pop before reviewing findings from previous studies on diasporic youth popular music consumption and the potential insights and limitations of these studies for understanding diasporic youth engagement with K-pop. Drawing on in-depth interviews with young Korean Canadians, this chapter examines how these diasporic youth engage with K-pop in the process of growing up and what meanings are generated from their diasporic consumption of K-pop. In particular, this chapter examines how K-pop is interpreted not only as an ethnic cultural text but also as a global cultural text. Moreover, it addresses how K-pop is appropriated by diasporic youth as a cultural resource for challenging the White-dominant cultural frame.

## UNDERSTANDING K-POP

K-pop often refers to Korean popular music, but such definitions may be too expansive to accurately capture the recent phenomenon of global fan culture triggered by major Korean idol groups, such as BTS, Blackpink, and Exo, to name a few. In reality, K-pop as a genre (as categorized in global music markets, charts, and media) may refer to a set of Korean music comprised of particular components and conventions. To be succinct, K-pop signifies “the music and dance of Korean idol pop groups” (Fuhr 2017, p. 283). More specifically, Shin (2017, p. 118) refers to K-pop as “Korean idol pop” whose music style involves “dance pop and, to a lesser degree, R&B ballad, along with some elements of hip-hop and electronica.” K-pop is also known for its enthusiastic fanbases, especially via social media. For example, due to global K-pop fan engagement, K-pop idol groups BTS and Exo have significantly outperformed on Twitter far more than any other artists including Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift (Blake 2018). K-pop especially appeals to post-millennial Generation Z, who are born in/after the mid-1990s (Kang 2018). K-pop is no longer a music trend emerging in Korea or Asia, as major K-pop groups’

overseas fanbases are estimated to outnumber their domestic counterparts (Tizzard 2021).

In analyzing this global phenomenon of K-pop, there have been debates about what constitutes K-pop and what the K in K-pop means (Fuhr 2016; Lie 2012; Jin et al. 2021). K-pop is undeniably a *Korean* cultural genre that rapidly reaches to non-Korean audiences across the globe. The genre is comprised of music performed by (mostly) Korean artists and in (mostly) the Korean language, and the systematic training/production system is often referred to as the “in-house system” (Shin 2009; Shin and Kim 2013). While the genre refers to made-in-Korea pop music products, the uniqueness of this genre is its exceptional level of hybridity in content and style; the K-pop industries have extensively absorbed Western music styles and genres and have expanded exponentially for decades (Anderson 2016; Jung 2011; Shin 2009). Due to its global nature, which also incorporates a postmodern and hybrid coalescence of music, visuals, dance, and fashion (Fuhr, 2016), it can be argued that K-pop is no longer “owned” by Korean audiences but has evolved into a cultural text and industry designed for audiences of different geocultural contexts.<sup>3</sup> The global nature of K-pop is deeply articulated with the genre’s integration into digital and social media environments. Among various media forms that constitute Hallyu, K-pop has attracted rapidly increasing media attention especially since Psy’s megahit “Gangnam Style” (2012) and BTS’s series of record-breaking successes in global music markets since the late 2010s. Compared to Korean dramas (known as K-drama) and Korean films, which led the early phase of the Korean Wave between the late 1990s and the 2000s, K-pop particularly benefits from the development of social media and its expanding

<sup>3</sup> K-pop is known for its extensive overseas fanbases. Moreover, the industries have increasingly recruited non-Korean talents, such as non-Korean idol members (e.g., Blackpink and Twice), and collaborated with international composers, choreographers, and marketers. Recently, the K-pop industries have experimented with different methods of dissemination. For example, a major K-pop entertainment company, JYP, trained and launched a girl group comprised of 9 Japanese members in 2020, aiming to utilize the K-pop industry’s insider knowledge and system for primarily Japanese markets. Furthermore, an experimental K-pop band, EXP-edition, comprised of all non-Korean members was launched by small K-pop label IMMABB Entertainment in 2017. For this project, the four members moved from the United States (US) to Korea in 2016, yet the group did not receive favorable reviews or find success in the domestic market. There have been controversies about this all non-Korean K-pop band, and some K-pop fans criticized this group as an example of cultural appropriation (Tubiera 2020).

user bases. It may be hard to explain why and how K-pop rapidly penetrated the global music markets without considering the role of YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, as well as many other specialized and networked digital media platforms such as V-Live (the personal broadcast platform for Korean pop culture celebrities, launched by the Korean Internet portal Naver) (e.g., Jin 2016; Jin et al. 2021; Jung and Shim 2014). As a highly digitally-driven and transnational cultural genre, K-pop has redefined itself as music that engages with local, national, and post-national dimensions of popular culture.

Until the late 2010s, when BTS achieved undeniable success in the global market and received rave reviews by Western critics and media, the K-pop industries were often viewed with skepticism in Western music markets. Some Western critics reduced this new cultural genre to a set of factory-made, commercially-driven commodities even until the early or mid-2010s. For example, American music critic Seabrook (2012) called the K-pop industry a “factory system” and noted that major idol groups are “seen by some as being too robotic to make it in the West.” However, several K-pop idol groups—BTS in particular—have moved beyond such pessimistic predictions and achieved remarkable success in Western markets along with critical acclamation. In BTS’s early, formative period, the group explicitly questioned mainstream critics’ categorizing of them as idols and as factory-manufactured pseudo-artists. In BTS’s song “Idol,” whose songwriters include BTS member RM, the lyrics are: “You can call me artist. You can call me idol. No matter what you call me. I don’t care. I am proud of it” (Hong 2020).

By engaging with K-pop’s national and ethnic origin sometimes and its hybrid and cosmopolitan styles other times, global audiences have diversified this cultural genre’s meanings—as a simultaneously national *and* post-national/postmodern genre (Jung 2013). K-pop indicates its national origin in its name (the “K” in K-pop); yet, K-pop as a set of “strategically manufactured, culturally hybridized popular products” has satisfied “the complex desires of some global mass pop-consumers” (Jung 2013, p. 117). The recent rise of K-pop in global music markets, especially among young people, vividly shows how a local form of music, which has gone through phases of “mimicry” and “catching up with the West,” undergoes a phase of local and global hybridization and furthermore moves toward “cultural cosmopolitanism” (Howard 2013) or “the latest stage of postmodern consumer aesthetics” (Fuhr 2016). In particular, for overseas audiences, the music can be received as the

foreign (because of its Korean attributes) and/or the familiar (because of its post-national, hybrid musical styles). This oscillation between (and combination of) the seemingly contrasted attributes of being foreign and familiar often synergistically appeals to overseas audiences and fans. The geocultural distance (i.e., being foreign) allows overseas fans to escape their local contexts and imagine a new world, while the musical proximity and hybridity (i.e., being familiar) might lower the barriers for overseas fans to engage in this “foreign” music (Yoon 2019). As examined in this chapter, Korean Canadians’ reception of K-pop may reveal the diasporic dimensions of the K-pop phenomenon—the ways in which K-pop is signified with different meanings especially between the proximal and the distant (or foreign) or between the ethnic and the global.

### DIASPORIC POPULAR MUSIC AND YOUTH CULTURE

Diasporic popular music flows and practices offer an interesting example to understand how diasporas encounter and engage in their cultural heritage, and in so doing, generate particular transnational meanings. Among other cultural texts, music is a powerful cultural resource that associates lived experiences with collective memories and identity (Baily and Collyer 2006). In migration and music studies, transnational migrants and their descendants are seen as bearers of tradition and/or facilitators of musical innovation (Baily and Collyer 2006). For example, migrant audiences and musicians can serve to maintain their cultural heritage and cultural texts in other cultural contexts (the “host” societies), while altering cultural texts of their ancestral homeland in conjunction with those of the “host” societies. In particular, with advanced digital media technologies, the innovative role of migrant music seems to be accelerated through the constant remix and hybridization of musical forms. As music transnationally flows, along with musicians and audiences, it re-engages with its roots and explores its routes.

Diasporic young people’s consumption of (ancestral) homeland music has been examined from several different perspectives. Among them, two groups of studies seem particularly relevant for K-pop-driven diasporic youth culture. First, a group of studies focused on the ways in which music from the homeland is utilized by migrant youth to better understand and connect with the histories and struggles of their ancestors and parents. For example, Maghbouleh’s (2010) study of Iranian American youth and their consumption of pop culture of pre-Revolutionary

Iran illustrated that homeland pop music can be “a key indicator of the intergenerational transmission of nostalgia” (p. 202). According to the study, for the children of immigrants, diasporic and ethnic language music offers a resource for their desire to recover a lost home. The study also reveals that diasporic music is a tool to bridge the generation gap and to “articulate the production of culture and national identity” (p. 213). Moreover, diasporic music can also provide emotional shelters or boundaries for immigrants and their children. Aydin’s (2016) study of Turkish migrants in Berlin illustrated that diasporic music served to make boundaries for migrants and thus produced an “enclave in which to take shelter from the difficulties of the outer world,” while keeping their connection with the homeland alive (p. 216). At a community level, diasporic Turks’ consumption of Turkish music functioned to transmit cultural memories and heritage; moreover, musical innovation (e.g., non-traditional musical styles and elements) emerged, and in so doing, cultural memories were constantly reshaped (Aydin 2016).

A second group of studies explored the process of cultural hybridization through diasporic experiences. According to these studies, diasporic youth do not only access ancestral homeland music for understanding and engaging with histories or for seeking emotional refuge. Certain forms of diasporic popular music are highly hybridized and relocalized in the “host” society and thus contribute to the reimagining and reshaping of diasporic audiences’ ethnic identities. For example, *desi* music among Indian-American youth in Western urban settings reveals how ethnic pop culture is both a “backward” looking (i.e., connected with the past and histories) and “forward” looking (i.e., connected with the here and now) resource for children of immigrants who grow up exposed to diverse Western cultural genres. *Desi* is a translocally-grown diasporic youth culture, which includes practices of remixing Punjabi folk music over Western dance music genres, such as hip-hop and house, and the genre combining of Hindi film music with similar dance beats (Diethrich 1999, p. 35). *Desi* music scenes emerged in Western urban contexts, including London and New York City, and became a subcultural or counter-hegemonic cultural trend among young people of South Asian heritage (Diethrich 1999; Maira 2002). Several studies of *desi* culture commonly point out that this cultural phenomenon serves to provide diasporic Asian youth in the West with connection to their ethnic origin and a new, multicultural sense of belonging (Alexander and Kim 2013; Diethrich 1999; Maira 2000, 2002).



The existing studies show that diasporic youth engage with popular music that originated in their ancestral homeland as a resource for understanding and imagining their ethno-racial *past* and roots on the one hand and as a resource for negotiating their contested *present* identity positions and thinking about their *future* on the other hand. That is, diasporic music can serve to fulfill cultural nostalgia for immigrants and their children, while “conjuring myths of authentic pasts” (Alexander and Kim, 2013 p. 359; see also Aydin 2016; Maghbouleh 2010); simultaneously, it can be more hybridized and mixed with Western music styles, while formulating new youth cultural styles such as *desi*. These studies show a spectrum between which diasporic youth explore and imagine their ethnic identity through popular music. Despite their contribution to understanding the ambivalent and complicated nature of diasporic youth identity and its articulation with popular culture, the studies draw on case studies during a pre- or early social media period and thus may not be directly applicable to the recent, social media-driven K-pop phenomenon. Moreover, the existing studies primarily addressed the ethnic cultural aspects of diasporic music in regional contexts (intra-regional contexts at most) rather than the extensive global circulations of an ethnic/national music.

In comparison with the diasporic music and youth culture addressed in the aforementioned studies, the K-pop phenomenon involves unprecedented widespread, global, fan practices far beyond an ethnic or diasporic youth demographic. The global circulation of K-pop among young people is far more dispersed than the examples of ethnic music flows addressed in the previous studies and not driven only by diasporic youth. As argued in this chapter, the diasporic Korean population constitutes an early adopter group in Hallyu, but they may no longer be a core consumer group (at least in terms of numbers) as non-Korean overseas fans seemingly outnumber those of Korean backgrounds in the recent overseas K-pop market (ARMY Census 2020; McLaren and Jin 2020).

As further discussed in the remainder of the chapter, K-pop is a problematic cultural genre as it simultaneously signifies (a) made-in-Korea music (the “K”) on the one hand and (b) pop music (“pop”) that conforms to global trends on the other hand, and in so doing, K-pop attempts to hide its own geocultural roots (Fuhr 2016). This tension (or synthesis) between the “K” (national/ethnic attributes) and “pop” (pursuit of Western genre music’s global appeal) may contribute to expanding the music’s markets. For diasporic youth of Korean ethnic

background, who are relatively acquainted with both Korean culture and Western pop music, the “K” and “pop” components may still seem contradictory, yet they may see the synergetic dynamism between the components. K-pop’s dilemma (or synergy) between the K and pop may resonate with young Korean Canadians’ own experiences and negotiation with their own hyphenated (Korean-Canadian) identities.

### ETHNIC SOUND OF K-POP

K-pop was introduced as made-in-Korea products in Canadian media, which means young Korean Canadians consume K-pop as an ethnic identifier and signifier, to some extent. The “K” in K-pop unavoidably has ethnic and national meanings for its overseas audiences, including diasporic Korean youth who associate the K with the cultural heritage of their ancestral homeland. Of course, such ethnic identification is not the only way of signifying K-pop among the young diasporic audience. Diasporic youth can still negotiate and navigate among different potential meanings associated with K-pop. This negotiation process can be compared with the diasporic youth’s own identity negotiation between different “ethnic options,” as was discussed in Chapter 2 (Oh 2015; Song 2003). While young Korean Canadians are familiar with Korean media through their family’s media experiences, their ties with Korean media are different from those of the first generation Korean Canadians. By examining the *what* and *how* of the diasporic young people’s engagement with K-pop, this section explores how K-pop is integrated into their transition to adulthood and contributes to furthering their ethnic identification.

#### *Growing Up and “Coming Out” as Ethnic*

As immigrants and their children have been able to access their homeland media and ethnic media through ethnic TV channels, satellite TV channels, and more recently, the Internet, diasporic consumption is not unique to Korean Canadians. First generation Korean immigrants in Canada also accessed Korean music and media during the pre-Hallyu (or nascent Hallyu) period (Yoon 2017). However, compared to older diasporic audiences’ access to their homeland media, young Korean Canadians’ engagement with K-pop reveals a new tendency in terms of the what and how of diasporic media consumption. The content and format of K-pop (i.e., the what of diasporic K-pop) are not necessarily nostalgic

and the youth selectively and critically engage with the hybridity of this advanced pop cultural form. Their consumption processes (i.e., the how of diasporic K-pop) are deeply integrated into digital media infrastructures enabling their individualized and participatory engagement across media and platforms.

For diasporic Korean youth, the recent K-pop phenomenon, which overlaps with their transition to adulthood, is noteworthy in terms of the what and how of diasporic cultural flows. In terms of content to be consumed (i.e., the what of cultural consumption), the recent wave of Hallyu does not necessarily involve traditional or somewhat essentialized notions of ethnic culture. In comparison with the first generation immigrants, the diasporic Korean youth who were born in Canada or moved while young may not inherently seek ethnic or homeland media; they choose a particular ethnic media form (such as K-pop, as opposed to conventional, pre-Hallyu Korean media) among various available media genres, including American pop music and TV dramas. Indeed, the young Korean Canadians interviewed for this book, who grew up in Canada and used English as their main language, selectively and critically engage with Korean media (Yoon 2020). The diasporic young people's interest in Korean media is significantly aligned with the recent wave of K-pop, in which highly hybrid and globally targeted media forms become main features. Their favorite K-pop artists were globally recognized idols and not the locally recognized singers typically liked by first generation Korean immigrants.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of music consumption patterns (i.e., the how of cultural consumption), the young people engaged with individual viewing and listening through smart digital media, such as the iPhone, when they were growing up. In so doing, they easily navigated and omnivorously consumed across different media genres and across Korean, Canadian,

<sup>4</sup> There were a few exceptional cases where interviewees listened to relatively old Korean ballad music popular for their parents' generation. For example, 21-year-old Sasha, who immigrated at the age of 6, was a fan of Lee Sun-hee, a veteran Korean singer who was born in 1964 and has been active since the mid-1980s. Sasha explained how she found out about the singer: "Because my mom always had interest in music herself she actually even has a lot of the Korean CDs at home. (...) because of my mom's influence I got interested more into Korean music." Another reason why Sasha was interested in older Korean music was that some of the older songs were remade by K-pop idols she also liked. For example, Lee Sun-hee's songs have been sung and remade by several younger Korean singers.

and American media, among others. At the time of the interviews, the preferred devices for media consumption were smartphones and laptops for most of the interviewees. Moreover, they accessed K-pop, along with other pop music or other media content, through social media or streaming platforms, which allow them to engage in fragmented viewing and listening. That is, family-oriented ethnic media consumption in a living room during their childhood shifted to individualized, fragmented consumption. Digital media infrastructure also enables their participatory consumption through various activities such as commenting, uploading user-generated content, and networking with other audiences (Yoon 2020). Interestingly, some young people also accessed Korea-based digital media platforms to get updated quickly about their favorite K-pop idols. For example, 22-year-old Meghan was one of several interviewees who frequently accessed Korean digital media platforms that livestream K-pop idols' personal broadcast: "Now I don't watch much traditional media. I watch more from my V-app (V-Live app) which is direct communication between K-pop idols and viewers. So they stream live videos kind of like Afreeca TV [i.e., Korean live streaming platform] but for K-pop idols." Scarlet, a 20-year-old second generation student in Toronto, who often hangs out with Korean Canadian friends and enjoys K-pop and other Korean media, identified two social media platforms she used to share K-pop-related information among her K-pop friends: "They would send me links through Facebook and KakaoTalk. Those are the two main ones, and LINE, but not as much, because they are like 'LINE isn't Korean' so I'm like 'Okay...' (laughs)."

The young Korean Canadians' engagement with K-pop appeared to be deeply interwoven with their transition to adulthood and development of a sense of ethnic belonging. While some interviewees' interest in recent K-pop gradually grew from their earlier interest in a range of Korean media, others engaged with K-pop relatively recently after a period of interruption. That is, during their childhood and adolescence, some interviewees lost their interest in Korean media and/or were more intrigued by the non-Korean language (American) media enjoyed by many of their peers. "I used to listen to Korean music as a little boy. But as I got older I liked hip-hop. It's always the mainstream music here. That's why I distanced myself from K-pop all these years," stated 28-year-old second generation Ethan, who recently became interested in K-pop. During childhood and adolescence, the "mainstream" culture often discouraged the diasporic youth from exploring further their interest in the Korean media to

which they had already been exposed through their parents and ethnic communities.

For some interviewees who had an interrupted period in their interest in Korean media, the recent K-pop phenomenon, which was often represented by global superstars such as BTS and Blackpink and their global fandom, was a significant trigger that (re)ignited their interest in Korean media. For them, the recent K-pop music and performance were largely different from Korean media during the pre- or early Hallyu era. According to these interviewees, K-pop was also no longer an ethnic musical form but hybrid pop music that consists of various musical styles and appealing visual components. Thus, K-pop seemed to gain symbolic currency among diasporic young people and even among non-diasporic (e.g., White) young people. K-pop was considered by the diasporic youth as a refreshing cultural genre that was sharply different from the Korean music that their parents listened to in the pre-Hallyu era.

As discussed in the previous chapters, the young Korean Canadians' growing up involves phases of ethnic identification. While some diasporic youth attempted to hide their ethnicity during childhood, they gradually made an effort for ethnic identification in late adolescence and early adulthood. In particular, for many interviewees, entrance to university appeared to have substantially changed their peer networks and understanding of their own ethnicity. Most of the interviewees recalled that their interaction with other Korean Canadians and Asian Canadians on the university campus helped them feel "OK" to be non-Whites. Those who entered large universities in Toronto and Vancouver began to identify themselves positively as Korean Canadians and people of color in alliance with their Asian peers. As discussed in earlier chapters, this process of "coming out" as ethnic in college (Maira 2002) has been observed in existing studies of young Koreans in North America and other ethnic minority youth as well (Danico 2004; Kibria 2002; D. Y. Kim 2014; Oh 2015).

While diasporic youth gradually challenge the pervasive pressure of assimilation and explore their ethnic options, through which ethnicity can be a resource rather than a stigma, the recent Western media attention to Hallyu further facilitated young Korean Canadians' ethnic identification. Notably, the interviewees' childhood and youth (the 2010s) overlap with the period during which Hallyu was introduced to North America and several K-pop artists, such as Psy, BTS, and Blackpink, attracted

Western media attention. 19-year-old Noah, who grew up in White-populated neighborhoods, was not substantially exposed to Korean media until his mid-teens. He was not particularly interested in the Korean TV programs that his parent sometimes watched until he was hooked by Psy's "Gangnam Style" and then became dedicated to other K-pop bands. He described himself prior to his introduction to the Hallyu phenomenon as being "Whitewashed." However, when he moved to Toronto for work after high school, he was introduced to Korean media and culture. Like Noah, for some young people in this book, the recent K-pop phenomenon contributed to their voluntary ethnic identification in their late adolescence or early adulthood. K-pop, a made-in-Korea product that is considered to be more trendy and youthful than previous Korean popular culture products, was incorporated into the process of their "coming out" as ethnic and questioning the existing White-dominant cultural frame.

### *Ethnic Identification Through Hallyu*

At the time of the interviews, most of the interviewees positively evaluated the circulation of Korean media in Canada and globally—by associating it with their ethnic identity or ethnic pride. K-pop as Korean pop music was particularly appealing to some interviewees who desired strongly to identify with the national and ethnic origin of K-pop. The tendency of strong identification with the (ancestral) homeland and its culture was especially evident among the 1.5 generation who had embodied memories of Korea. Yet, there were a few second generation interviewees who also expressed their robust desires to learn more and thus identify with Korea. For these youth desiring to identify with Korea (whether 1.5 or second generation), this sense of belonging and affiliation offered by K-pop is even more important than the particular style or content of the music.

Some interviewees were relatively dedicated K-pop fans and others were not, though they still frequently listened to the music as a way of feeling a cultural connection to their (ancestral) homeland. For example, 21-year-old second generation Paige was not a particularly dedicated fan of K-pop, but she deeply identified with K-pop: "I don't think there's anything really special about K-pop but maybe the fact that it is Korean and I am Korean. I was like 'Oh, Wow, my country is pretty cool!'" Like Paige, some young people in the study considered the recent K-pop phenomenon as an opportunity for them to feel enhanced ethnic

pride and identification (regardless of their preference in music genres). For example, Stella, a 24-year-old second generation professional who had never been to Korea and thus stated that “Korea kind of feels like a foreign country,” still had a strong sense of ethnic identification when she listened to K-pop: “If someone said this is Korean music, if someone point that out, and it is a good one, then I feel *jabusim* (pride) about it.” She was not a fan or follower of particular K-pop groups, but still enjoyed Korean music and felt proud of it.

As addressed in the previous chapters, some Korean Canadian youth considered themselves as “cultural ambassadors” to promote K-pop and Hallyu. The pride was also reinforced through the young people’s feeling of regaining connection with their (ancestral) homeland via Hallyu. Through her participation in the K-pop soundscape, Rebecca, a 21-year-old undergraduate student who immigrated at the age of 2 and thus had no memories of the homeland, felt imaginarily connected to Korea again. She described her journey of “back to Korean media” and virtually returning to Korea along with her recent critical awareness of the White-dominant culture.

(When I grew up) A good chunk of my life I was still into Western music and I didn’t really care about K-pop. But then what ultimately brought me back (to K-pop) is the fact that I was Whitewashed and I wanted to stick with English but then at some point I was just like, “Oh, I kind of miss Korean and using Korean!” I guess. K-pop helps because most of the lyrics are in Korean and you get to see Korean people.

As Rebecca notes, K-pop serves as a means of ethnic identification for Korean Canadian youth. The interviewees tended to acknowledge that recent Hallyu contributed to their positive Korean and Asian ethnic affirmation. 20-year-old Dale, who immigrated at Grade 1 and much later encountered K-pop, joined a K-pop dance team in Toronto in his late teens. He commented on the process of his ethnic identification that occurred in his mid- and late teens.

I really started to miss the Korean culture. I missed Korean people, I missed, talking about stuff that was more related to Korea. So now personally I think I would like to categorize myself as a Korean rather than a Canadian.

However, diasporic young people's ethnic identification through Hallyu and K-pop does not mean they always associate this cultural genre with traditional and authentic aspects of Korean culture. Their desire for ethnic identification does not simply mean their pursuit of ethnic roots transmitted from their parents. The diasporic youth in this book were not "passive conduits for their parents' nostalgia" and instead adopted and appropriated diasporic cultural symbols in ways relevant to their own experiences (Maira 2002, p. 147). While the diasporic youth noticed traditional cultural norms in Hallyu media content (e.g., respect for elders in K-drama or Korean entertainment shows), K-pop was not often associated with traditional or authentic aspects of Korean culture. Rather, as 20-year-old second generation Scarlet noted, "with K-pop you can't define Korea because there are other aspects to Korean culture." Like Scarlet, some interviewees did not want K-pop to represent an essentialized mode of Korean culture.

In this regard, public attention to K-pop could bring the diasporic youth uncomfortable feelings owing to the stereotypical and homogenous association of K-pop and Korean Canadians. Some of the interviewees questioned the assumption that associated them with Korean popular culture regardless of their actual cultural tastes. For example, due to their peer's stereotyping, they were often assumed to be K-pop fans. 19-year-old K-pop fan Cody sometimes felt uncomfortable about some of his peers who assumed he was a natural-born K-pop fan with sufficient knowledge about K-pop and Korean media: "Only because I am Korean, some people are like 'Oh, you know BTS?'" That is, minority audiences' ethnic identification through the K in K-pop may be contradicted by mainstream audiences' othering of the K in K-pop. Whether or not they came out as K-pop fans among peers, the young Korean Canadians interviewed for this book enjoyed the extensive availability and global recognition of K-pop. The diasporic youth sometimes proudly identified with the K in K-pop, but they were also worried about the essentialization of Korean culture as a narrowly or stereotypically defined ethnic culture in the time of growing attention to Hallyu media.

### GLOBAL SOUND OF K-POP

K-pop seems to allow diasporic youth to engage with "here" and "there" simultaneously. That is, while the music brings the feeling of "there" (Korea) identified by the language and the brand (the K), it involves



cosmopolitan imagination through its highly hybrid and kaleidoscopic styles, applicable to “here” and “now.” By engaging with K-pop, diasporic youth also create their own versions of this cultural genre as an ethnic, local, and global form. For them, K-pop does not simply reflect its ethnicity. While the interviewees acknowledged their pride as ethnic Koreans with regard to the K-pop phenomenon, the meanings of K-pop for them were not limited to ethnic identification. As K-pop is increasingly recognized as a global cultural genre for young people, its diasporic consumption may not only allow the diasporic youth to pursue an authentic ethnic identity or to feel inherited nostalgia for the ancestral homeland. At some point, diasporic youth may dissociate from the ethnic implications of the music but enjoy its kaleidoscopic universe—in this process, K-pop as music originating in their ancestral homeland may be de-ethnicized (Milikowski 2000) and re-signified as a global youth cultural form.

### *Kaleidoscopic and Relatable*

K-pop has been gaining cultural currency among young Canadians and defining itself as a global youth cultural form. In more recent interviews conducted in 2021, the interviewees strongly agreed on the increasing attention to K-pop among their peers. Indeed, the megahit K-pop group BTS has become a major player in global music markets, as shown by the group’s records on major music charts including the Billboard Hot 100 since the late 2010s (McClellan 2021; Yonhap News Agency 2021). In this regard, K-pop is no longer signified as mainly an ethnic or national music genre. At least for its global fans, the K in K-pop has increasingly come to mean a transcultural signifier that moves beyond the geocultural context of its origin country Korea (McLaren and Jin 2020).

The interviewees considered K-pop as a new breed of pop culture that is more advanced than (or comparable with) mainstream American music. 25-year-old Luke described K-pop as a “very modern and urban” genre that is “more fast paced [than American pop].” Moreover, K-pop is distinguished from American or Canadian counterparts as K-pop artists have various qualities that can perform across different genres and platforms. 16-year-old Kimberly praised K-pop artists: “they sing, but not only they sing but they also dance, and most of them can rap and they are also trained for entertainment. They are also in a group setting, and so they can be more popular.” For many interviewees, K-pop was considered to

be overall more entertaining than American pop music. According to 19-year-old Beth, “K-pop is really entertaining. It’s better than American music for building up fantasies about what you could do. It’s a source of immersive entertainment rather than an entertainment that you stand outside of.”

In this manner, the young people immerse themselves in the universe of K-pop, which is highly entertaining but not fully detached from their daily contexts. This imaginary space created through participating in K-pop can be referred to as the universe of “kaleidoscopic pop,” as defined by S. Y. Kim (2018). She argued that fans engage with K-pop as a kaleidoscopic universe, which hybridizes different forms of performance and music through the convergence of various media platforms. K-pop music videos are examples of the kaleidoscopic aspect of this genre, as they often present “a flamboyant mixing of classical and kitschy, old and new, foreign and local elements, precisely to be able to travel across cultural borders in the age of global media” (S. Y. Kim 2018, pp. 96–97).

For the young people in this book, K-pop was not only music but a highly performative and visual genre. The performance of K-pop appears to distinguish the genre from its Western counterparts. Rebecca, a 21-year-old K-pop fan and cover dancer, pointed out that K-pop as a dance genre is unique and advanced compared to Western mainstream music. In particular, she noted that K-pop choreography is highly recognized among non-Korean peer cover dancers.

How Korea is stepping up in terms of dance and their choreography is capturing a lot of people’s attention. I have talked to so many people and they’re like, “Oh, actually I saw K-pop dance videos and they were so cool, blah, blah, blah.” Also K-pop idols look very different from the people you would see on American TV. And some people prefer changes so K-pop is just something fresh to look at.

The pleasure offered by the kaleidoscopic universe of K-pop does not occur outside of the audience’s reality, but is the pleasure of engagement through identification with the music and artists. Given that pleasure through popular culture often stems from identification (with stars and objects) and imagination (Fiske 1987), it is not surprising that the K-pop universe is perceived by its diasporic fans as a kaleidoscopic *and* relatable universe. K-pop’s kaleidoscopic universe is highly relatable for the diasporic youth as there are similarities between the youth and idols, both of

whom are similar ages and going through transition to adulthood. Moreover, the interviewees thought that the idols' styles, fashion, and makeup were more applicable to their everyday contexts, as noted by 20-year-old Dale.

They [K-pop artists] follow a very popular trend. I usually look at their style of clothing and try to see what I can actually pull off with my visuals. So, basically K-pop idols wear clothing that people can actually follow, while American singers wear clothing just to catch people's eyes and stand out.

Partly due to K-pop idols' frequent social media presence and communication with their fans through various platforms, such as Twitter and V-Live, the young people felt much more intimate with K-pop idols compared with Western pop stars. The frequent social media engagement by some K-pop artists (e.g., BTS) seemed to present them as a mixture of superstars and micro-celebrities; while superstars use conventional broadcast and mainstream media yet maintain a certain distance from their anonymous audiences, micro-celebrities build intimate relationships with their fans by sharing mediated stories of their ordinary lives through social media (Abidin 2018).

Kaleidoscopic and relatable attraction of K-pop idols and the K-pop universe is facilitated by K-pop industries' transmedia storytelling. Idols perform not only on stage but appear through transmedia platforms—TV shows, films, radio, video games, and personal broadcasting.<sup>5</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3, idol group members often appear in TV shows or vlogs to reveal their everyday lives and their feelings behind the stage. Grace, a dedicated Hallyu fan in Vancouver, described one of her favorite K-pop groups Mamamoo.

I follow Mamamoo. They're only four people, so, they act like very close friends. Two of them are even friends from junior high. So they are very

<sup>5</sup> K-pop industries have developed one-source, multiuse marketing methods, in which a form of content (e.g., idol groups and/or their songs) is deployed through various platforms and formats. For example, idols appear not only on stages but also on film, TV dramas, entertainment shows (as guests or hosts), radio shows (as DJs), and in numerous advertisements for big corporations, including Hyundai, Samsung, and LG. Through this marketing strategy, the Korean media industry has rapidly increased its domestic and overseas profits (Seo 2012).

close to each other. They do a lot of skinship,<sup>6</sup> and then, I got into Mamamoo because I was watching their video. It's a video of them playing around in the car. And even though it's unedited, they, always, can't stop fooling around, and then, they always make jokes, and there's a section where they make their own song. And they're really good at it too. So it made me start liking them.

By being immersed in idols' transmedia storytelling, some interviewees identified strongly with idols' transnational journeys to transcend their local boundaries, especially in relation to their own diasporic experiences. Indeed, some interviewees identified their own diasporic journeys and experiences of growing up with the K-pop idols' efforts for global stardom. Speaking about Blackpink, an idol group comprised of three diasporic Asian women (two Koreans raised overseas and one Thai) and one Korean woman, 16-year-old K-pop fan Kimberly implied how she as a diasporic person might identify with the diasporic journey of the idol members.

I feel like some people can relate to that group [Blackpink] a little bit more just because they also come from all over the world. I feel like people really like that global effect and they've come a long way and they've even performed at Coachella [i.e., The Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in the US, where Blackpink performed in 2019].

For Kimberly, K-pop is global in the sense that it engages with the global journeys and efforts of idol members (both Korean and non-Korean members) to reach out to global audiences. As Kimberly pointed out, idol members' efforts and diverse backgrounds make K-pop more relatable. In this manner, for young diasporic audiences, K-pop appears to represent global sound, not because it creates a globally hegemonic music style but rather it involves the young members' global journeys which may resonate with the diasporic young people's life experiences.

The young people in the study did not necessarily reduce K-pop to the narrowly defined idol system but instead appreciated the multifaceted

<sup>6</sup> Along with the rise of Hallyu overseas, many terminologies of Koreanized English (known as Konglish), which are used by idols and Korean media, have been introduced to English-speaking Hallyu fans. For example, skinship refers to intimate physical contact. K-pop fans overseas have increasingly become familiar with Konglish expressions and thus use them.

talents and global efforts of the young idols and could relate to them. The interviewees humanized, and felt connected with, the K-pop idols, and in so doing, appeared to challenge the mainstream media discourse that disapproves of the idols as copycat products manufactured through “factory”-like systems (Seabrook 2012). For the interviewees, K-pop artists are young people struggling with their own diasporic routes and challenging such top-down, disapproving discourses. Overall, for diasporic youth, K-pop is signified as diasporic, and thus global, sound. From their perspective, the global sound of K-pop reveals how young non-Western idols make an effort to go global through diasporic journeys and share their experiences with their fans who may also be on their own life journeys.

### *Countering Through the K*

K-pop’s global appeal shows how the genre has evolved by targeting global audiences and markets, as illustrated by its extensive hybrid textuality (e.g., genre blending and English mixing in lyrics) (Chun 2017; Jin and Ryoo 2014). However, K-pop’s high level of hybridity may not necessarily erase the K in K-pop. Rather, K-pop serves as a resource to move beyond the top-down signification of Hallyu—either as a Korean national export (as promoted by the Korean government and industries) or a racialized, marginal commercial trend (as constructed by the Western mainstream media).

First, some Korean Canadians questioned the association of K-pop with Korean national pride as commonly shown in the discourse of Hallyu as soft power—that is, the country’s power that entices, attracts, and influences overseas audiences (Nye and Kim 2013). As Fuhr (2016) pointed out, K-pop may be “a result of strategic planning and a fostering of the domestic entertainment sector by state-national bodies” on the one hand and “utilized by the government to increase the nation’s cultural capital” on the other hand (p. 10). The signification of K-pop as a national export has been promoted by institutional gatekeepers, such as Korean news media, K-pop industries, and the Korean government, who have often defined this cultural genre as a major export of Korea. In response to the strong association of K-pop with Koreanness, some interviewees were concerned about the increasingly nationalistic signification of Hallyu in

media and among Korean audiences. Speaking of Hallyu, Luke, a 25-year-old 1.5 generation Torontonion, suggested a dissociation of ethnic or national meanings from popular culture texts.

I don't think there's anything to worry about, or to be proud about. It's just what it is. There's not much significance. I mean, we really shouldn't attach that much significance into it, as Korean media, Korean government, and the Korean academia do nowadays. Because I watch a British TV series, it's not like I'm fully into British culture and you know, it doesn't. I'm just trying to find out what I really like, and I just consume it. And if I'm bored I'll leave, and if I'm not, then fantastic, you know.

Luke and a few others were cautious (if not skeptical) about such associations between Hallyu and Korea's ethnic/national pride. Luke believes audiences choose among pop cultural content and move between different items, regardless of the geocultural origin of the items.

Second, for the young diasporic audiences, K-pop was more than an ethnic music genre due to its hybrid and alternative nature. The K in K-pop appeared not to be simply essentialized as an unchangeable cultural component of Korea but rather to be re-signified as a component that reorients pop music. For some interviewees, K-pop was an alternative to, or a refugee from, the mainstream soundscape. While K-pop was commonly considered by the interviewees as a hybrid music genre drawn from American music styles, it also signified an alternative to American pop music. When asked to define K-pop, 28-year-old Torontonion Ethan, like many other interviewees, emphasized the genre's hybridity: "K-pop is like a whole mix of everything. But it has its own weird, unique sound." For the interviewees, K-pop is similar with yet different from mainstream pop music. Criticizing the market dominance of American-oriented Anglo-Western pop music, several interviewees hoped that the difference of K-pop would contribute to expanding the Western-centric global soundscape. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the interviewees lamented racial barriers in American pop music, which marginalize K-pop. According to them, K-pop was signified as ethnic or marginal music in Western markets, not only because of its musical attributes but also because of Western music markets' systematic discrimination of Asians and Asian cultures as the other of the default Anglo-American music. The aforementioned Ethan pointed out the "large racial barriers" that hinder K-pop's further rise in North America: "the majority White-based

entertainment is a barrier for K-pop. K-pop musicians, someone like Ailee (Korean American K-pop idol). Probably this has to do with her race.” Despite the increasing dissemination of K-pop, the diasporic young people considered K-pop subject to racialization in Western mainstream media and markets. This awareness allows the diasporic audiences to think about the White-dominant cultural frame they have experienced.

Through these processes of engaging with K-pop not necessarily as ethnic/foreign music but as a global cultural text that may contribute to diversifying the mediascape, the diasporic youth see K-pop not simply as a national export but as hybrid music that may also reveal the limitations of the existing Western-centric mediascapes. By consuming K-pop as global sound, the diasporic youth may realize that their own cultural difference may not be necessarily disadvantageous but instead advantageous (the “second generation advantages” discussed in Chapter 2). This critical awareness may offer counter-hegemonic moments that allow the diasporic youth to explore multiple senses of belonging to here and there without sacrificing or silencing either of them. Furthermore, as evidenced by global fans’ participation in campaigns for social justice, such as BTS fan engagement with the Black Lives Matter campaign, K-pop can be utilized as a cultural resource for social change (Benjamin 2020; Bruner 2020). In this process, diasporic youth who are equipped with bilingual and bicultural knowledge may make a meaningful contribution.

### *Between Hybridization and Westernization*

The diasporic youth engage with K-pop as a highly hybridized cultural form with multiple and flexible significations, which also may challenge the White-dominant cultural frame and mediascape. However, some interviewees considered the increasing incorporation of English and Western elements in K-pop as a potentially undesirable or problematic type of hybridization as the tendency was interpreted as simple “Westernization” of K-pop (or K-pop’s imitation of Western pop music). For global audiences, K-pop is perceived as a made-in-Korea item and highly hybridized cultural form (Jin 2016; Ryoo 2009). The young people in this book see K-pop as global sound especially through its hybrid aspects, which they distinguished from mere imitation of Western music styles. For example, the increasing adoption of the English language refrains and rap parts in K-pop songs was considered by several interviewees as a detrimental component in enjoying the music.

For Dale, a 20-year-old in Toronto, K-pop's introduction of English parts was not particularly appealing as they were not necessarily effectively incorporated into the Korean lyrics of the songs. Dale assumed that the frequent use of English refrains in many K-pop songs might be intended to "appeal to the rest of the world." However, he noted that frequent, and sometimes irrelevant, use of English could be interruptive.

There are many times when they say something in English and I can't even understand what they're saying. That has a huge impact on the song itself. I like listening to the lyrics and if I can't understand the lyrics, then it just kinda turns me off.

As Dale suggested, for Korean Canadian fans who understand the Korean lyrics without translations, the "almost random" insertion of English phrases may restrict the pleasure of their listening experiences. This Korean Canadian response to hybridization of languages in K-pop songs may be different from other global fans of non-Korean backgrounds. The use of the English language has been considered as a characteristic of K-pop, which positively appeals to international fans (Fuhr 2016; Jin and Ryoo 2014). Fuhr (2016, p. 66) argued that English in K-pop serves to build "a linguistic gateway through which international fans can easily connect with the [K-pop] songs."

Since the interview with Dale in 2015, the incorporation of English in K-pop songs has become more frequent. Several major K-pop idol groups released fully English-written songs, some of which successfully penetrated global music markets. Blackpink's diasporic Korean members Jennie and Rosé have respectively released their English solo songs in 2018 and 2021, which were overall positively received by Korean and global fans. BTS released consecutively three English-written songs between 2020 and 2021, all of which were exceptionally well received by global audiences ("Dynamite," "Butter," and "Permission to Dance"). Compared to earlier English mixing in lyrics in K-pop songs, in which English was written and sung by Korean artists, the recent tendency of using English by major K-pop idols reveals a more professionalized process in which English-speaking lyricists, producers, and/or singers (foreign-educated K-pop idols) are involved. While the effective use of English language in K-pop is welcomed by fans, many overseas fans, including some of the interview participants in this book, appear to



prefer Korean-written songs, as the language is an important component for the K-pop artists to express their feelings and deliver their message (Lee 2019). In this regard, K-pop and its global fandom have contributed to challenging the tyranny of English language music in global music markets. For example, BTS's overseas fans prefer to call the seven members by their Korean names (instead of English names) and make an effort to sing along with their Korean songs (Hong 2020).

In this manner, some interviewees seemed to make a distinction between hybridization and Westernization, although the division may often be ambiguous. That is, K-pop's hybrid styles that move beyond the replication of American pop music (Bhabha 1994) are considered K-pop's constructive and positive attributes, but its attempts to imitate the Western cultural codes and styles (such as the incorporation of English lyrics and Western appearances) were not necessarily welcome. For example, 28-year-old Ethan was skeptical about several recent K-pop groups' highly Westernized fashion and appearance.

Korean shows and musicians now don't look Korean. They look like Koreans who try to get Western features. And I personally hate that. It's pretty much like saying that looking Korean isn't good looking enough. And so that's why you have to get these Caucasian features, you know what I mean? I think that's a travesty in the Korean culture (...)

As Ethan points out, if perceived as a mere imitation or knock-off of American pop, K-pop may no longer be an interesting global cultural item to diasporic youth. While diasporic audiences were supportive of the cutting-edge, however hybrid, cultural aspects of K-pop, they were critical of its imitative aspects. As shown by their understanding of the hybrid and Western cultural components, diasporic youth can be considered as a critical and selective fan audience group in the mediascape of Hallyu (Yoon 2020) as they have bilingual and bicultural frames of reference to evaluate K-pop in relation to the mainstream pop music they also listened to.

As discussed in this section, young Korean Canadians negotiate, and contribute to, the different meanings of K-pop—especially as an ethnic and/or global cultural item. The ambivalent (and potentially contradictory) significations of K-pop between the ethnic and the global reveal the ways in which K-pop is hybridized and thus generates multiple meanings, depending on the audiences of different cultural backgrounds. In

this process of meaning-making, diasporic young people's cultural literacy seems to play an important role. Several K-pop dedicated interviewees defined themselves as relatively knowledgeable fans and in so doing distinguished themselves from the Koreaboo-type Western fans who fetishize the difference of K-pop.<sup>7</sup> The young Korean Canadians' "second generation advantages" (Kasinitz et al. 2008) allowed them to contribute to translating and introducing K-pop to the global mediascape. A few interviewees were relatively actively involved in production of paratexts, such as subtitles, while some others shared their knowledge with other K-pop fans of non-Korean background. Several study participants interviewed in 2021—during and after the megahits of BTS's songs in mainstream music charts—spoke about occasions that their classmates (of non-Korean background) approached them to ask about or talk about K-pop. As K-pop becomes a popular cultural form among some young people, diasporic Korean fans may gain increasing symbolic power in the scene of K-pop fandom in Canada. Symbolic power in a youth subculture, which has been referred to as "subcultural capital," refers to the knowledge of and ability to perform a particular subcultural style (Thornton 1996). Subcultural capital comprises "artefacts and knowledge which, within a specific subculture, are recognized as tasteful, 'hip' and sophisticated" (Jensen 2006, p. 263). Over the period of this book project (2015 to 2021), it seemed clearly that K-pop and Hallyu media had advanced their symbolic values among Canadian youth. With their subcultural capital, young Korean Canadian fans negotiate multiple meanings of K-pop as ethnic and global cultural forms.

## CONCLUSION

K-pop has increasingly expanded its global audience bases. The young Korean Canadians interviewed for this book, whose adolescence overlaps with the period of extensive global circulation and rise of K-pop, engaged with this emerging music genre both as ethnic and as global sound. Despite media discourse attempts to essentialize the meaning of K-pop simply as pop music made in Korea, the meaning of this pop culture genre is more complicated as the national signifier of the "K"

<sup>7</sup> Koreaboo is slang negatively used by Hallyu fans. The term refers to non-Korean fans obsessed with Korean culture (often without sufficient cultural knowledge). See Chapter 2 for further discussion about the Koreaboo.

is articulated with the “pop” component that resonates with hybridizing or Westernizing forces.

By consuming K-pop as ethnic and global sound, Korean Canadian fans obtain positive feelings about who they are and critically re-examine the White-dominant culture they were immersed in. The recent rise of K-pop subculture may help diasporic Korean youth confidently speak about themselves and the music they like without self-monitoring and awareness of the White gaze. In the time of Hallyu, young Korean Canadians who used to hide their cultural taste for Korean popular culture owing to discriminatory public gazes and stereotyping voluntarily “come out” as K-pop fans. Furthermore, K-pop may allow diasporic young people to perform and explore cultural identities between here and there through experiencing the tensions and hybridity of different cultural forms and norms (Maira 2002). By engaging with, and negotiating, the ethnic and global meanings associated with K-pop through transmedia experiences, diasporic Korean youth seek ethnic identification and explore multiple senses of belonging.

As introduced at the beginning of this chapter, Korean American actor Randall Park was touched by his feeling of immersion in the K-pop universe in which people of various backgrounds were singing together in Korean in a large concert location in the US. Meanwhile, Michelle Cho, a Canada-based professor of Korean heritage and fan of BTS, felt positively about the emergence and recognition of K-pop because the phenomenon offers Korean diasporas in North America “a kind of different sense of confidence or understanding of what they can contribute to society as opposed to having to downplay or even hide aspects of Koreanness (...)” (CBC Radio 2020). These anecdotes show how K-pop as an ethnic and global genre is meaningfully integrated into diasporic Koreans’ identity work and sense of belonging.

Diasporic youth find K-pop kaleidoscopic, playful, and relatable. The imaginary kaleidoscopic space does not simply serve to fulfill ethnic nostalgia or to reinforce consumable urban sound. The ethnic and global sound of K-pop may offer counter-hegemonic moments and resources with which diasporic youth can question Western-centric, commodifying, or nationalistic forces. As early adopters and cultural translators, Korean Canadian youth may play a role in the progress of this new youth cultural practice. Moreover, as critical audience members, diasporic Korean youth may be keenly aware of Korea-based fans’ nationalistic celebration of

K-pop on the one hand and the Koreaboo-type Western fans' fetishization and essentialization of Korean culture on the other. Young Korean Canadians' role as a bicultural audience in K-pop's global soundscape reveals the diasporic dimensions of Hallyu. Equipped with bicultural and bilingual literacy, the diasporic youth question Western-centric and White-dominant cultural production and consumption, while challenging the essentialization of ethnic cultures.

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