

2016

Why K-Pop Will Continue to Dominate Social Media: Jenkins' Convergence Culture in Action

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The Good Life

in Asia's
Digital 21st Century



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The suggested citation is:
Digital Asia Hub. (2016). *The Good Life in Asia's Digital 21st Century*.
Hong Kong.



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Why K-Pop Will Continue to Dominate Social Media: Jenkin's Convergence Culture in Action

Raizel Liebler and Keidra Chaney
The Learned Fangirl

YouTube's first music awards surprised many mainstream music fans in 2013, when the Korean pop ("K-pop") group Girls' Generation beat out many U.S. pop music stars for Video of the Year (Yang, 2013). In 2015, the fans of K-pop group T-ara won Billboard's Fan Army Face-Off, beating out the fans of well-established Western artists like One Direction and Beyoncé ("Fan Army," 2015). The matchup against One Direction led to the globally trending hashtag on Twitter, #WeLove1DandKpop ("Fan Army," 2015). While some U.S. critics and Western music fans may see these events as flukes, there is a complex history at play here. This years-long history involves the interaction of mobilized fans, the use of worldwide accessible platforms and social media, and global copyright law, upending the assumed social order of online fan communities.

Media scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) has described "convergence culture" as both a bottom-up and top-down process by which media consumers negotiate their right to participate and interact with new media tools, even while media owners negotiate with creating new revenue opportunities and normalizing consumer behaviors (Jenkins, 2006, p. 243). K-Pop fan community activity is an example of this, serving as both a cultural practice and a global market catalyst.

Specific online platforms help to facilitate this fandom activity. For example, conversations on YouTube are fan-driven and lack the gate-keeping and hierarchy of more traditional outlets. This freedom to discover, communicate, and respond makes YouTube an ideal forum for niche fan communities to connect and mobilize. Observe a YouTube comment thread for any K-Pop group, and you'll likely see a global community of fans stumping for their beloved group in a variety of award categories. This happens with other fan

communities, certainly, but because so much of this global fan conversation occurs on YouTube, it follows that mobilizing fans would be easier for K-pop fans in this space. YouTube picked up on this interaction early, launching an official, dedicated K-Pop channel in 2011 (Sang-Hun & Russell, 2012).

This short essay will explore how the South Korean music industry has responded formally and informally to online fan activity, and how a light copyright touch led to the worldwide success of K-pop. We will also explore how online activity disputes regarding K-pop have been almost entirely outside of a legal context - unlike the fans (or listeners) versus labels (or artists) debate that is the continued focus of U.S. music industry.

Theory and Power

Researchers Gibson, Rommele, and Ward (2004) wrote about how the Internet facilitates and reinforces participatory behavior, saying that online spaces are "free from centralized control with intrinsically empowering characteristics - costless, space-less, timeless" (Rommele & Ward, 2004, p. 1). This kind of decentralized and ungoverned media environment supports people's ability to make blogs, upload videos, and conduct other fan-based activities.

Girls' Generation's 2013 YouTube victory was fueled by international fan activity online, specifically on YouTube. Though this fandom existed long before their win, since the formation of Girls' Generation in 2007, YouTube and online culture in general, has played a catalyzing role in K-Pop's growth in the U.S. and other non-Korean countries. This growth has been based in part on the mobilization of fans, and label marketing and interaction. Online participation is the driving force behind K-Pop music discovery and fandom in the U.S. and Europe, particularly for so-called "idol groups" like Girls Generation. Fans work collectively and, as a result, reinforce the popularity of K-pop globally online.

This push is not just from fans, it is also government supported; Korea has a vested interest in making K-Pop accessible to the West. Journalist Euny Hong stated that "Korea look[s] to pop culture as a way to create new sources of revenue, unite people, and generate an exportable product that [will] help spread Korean culture globally" (Hong, 2014, p. 98). The Korean Ministry of Culture's Cultural Content Office promotes music alongside video games, movies, and television, but is also the government branch responsible for copyright enforcement, creating and enforcing copyright policies (Hong, 2014, pp. 98-105). The Cultural Content Office is managing a public-private \$1 billion USD investment fund for the cultural content industry, with a five year plan to increase Korean culture exports to more than \$10 billion (Hong, 2014, p. 100-102).

YouTube, Twitter, and Music Fan Mobilization

During this time, YouTube, as both a platform and a technology company, has played a specific role in connecting and catalyzing the international K-pop music community, as well as many others. As stated in the *New York Times* in 2012, “YouTube, Facebook and Twitter make it easier for K-pop bands to reach a wider audience in the West, and those fans are turning to the same social networking tools to proclaim their devotion” (Sang-Hun & Russell, 2012). However, it’s important to look back to observe how YouTube’s own purpose has evolved. When YouTube launched in 2005, the platform was widely viewed as a dumping ground for home videos or, among the alarmist set, as a breeding ground for porn and video piracy (Sacks, 2011). Since then, YouTube has emerged as one of Google’s star acquisitions, successfully experimenting with revenue models and partnerships to evolve as an entertainment and media network (Sacks, 2011).

The U.S. recording industry’s litigious attitude towards file-sharing in the early 2000s deterred many music fans from online sharing, and for a long time there was a dearth of online platforms for easy sharing of large music files (Arewa, 2010, p. 462-64). As a result, YouTube emerged as a sort of back-door music sharing platform. Fans could upload music of all genres and pair that with slideshows of images. YouTube became a point of reference for curious music fans doing informal background research on a pop culture reference or catching up on a band’s discography (Kim, 2014, p. 75).

By the fall of 2008, YouTube’s monthly global audience grew dramatically from 344 million unique users to 500 million, partially because of its global community growth endeavors (Sacks, 2011). It is notable to mention that 2008 is also the year YouTube was introduced in South Korea, as well as, according to some K-Pop fans, the “Golden Age” of K-Pop fandom (Seoulbeats, 2012).

But even before YouTube’s evolution into a media company, the growing online K-pop community in the mid 2000s used the service as an easy, consistent way to upload and share videos. Global music licensing restrictions meant that a limited catalog was available in most non-Korean countries for newer fans to view, and restrictions in Korean character displays online meant that fans who could not read Korean would have a hard time identifying artists and songs on file-sharing networks. Both restrictions made a deeper dive into K-Pop difficult for fans outside of Korea until very recently.

Korean “Labels” and Licensing

Another major reason for the difference in how K-Pop fans interact with labels and artists has to do with how artist contracts are negotiated differently

for Korean and Western labels. For Korean pop artists, the term “label” is a misnomer - or at least not a complete description. Relatively new for Western artists, but the absolute standard for Korean artists, Korean management companies/labels serve as a complete 360-degree management of everything that an artist brings to the public. There is only one company to contact for licensing everything from commercial products to television/movie productions to music, including recording, videos, and touring. The ways that artists are promoted, including appearing on multiple live music shows and official releases are highly structured and planned; as stated by Kim in *K-Pop: Roots and Blossoming of Korean Popular Music*, “an idol group is meticulously managed through a production system that maximizes commercial profits” (Kim, 2012, p. 83).

So if SM Entertainment (for example) wants to promote Girls’ Generation worldwide, they can truly speak with one voice. If they want fan-created remixes and dance videos to be allowed on YouTube, they can do so - without having to check with other license holders. Therefore, the lack of strict copyright enforcement of K-pop on YouTube and other social media platforms (unlike the approach of Western copyright owners) by copyright owners is deliberate - and serves to increase fan participation.

While this is not the place to talk about whether or not this “vertically integrated” approach is a good deal for performers, it is a great approach from the perspective of global fans who are provided with a bounty of video content to consume, share, and talk about. Speaking with one voice, a Korean label can make videos or content officially available, unlike well-publicized examples of Western content owners’ confusion over ownership and licensing leading to actual limits on or threats to pull back content sharing, including Nine Inch Nails, and many other artists (Reznor, 2007; Gardner, 2014). This is a huge advantage for fans of Korean pop music who do not have to worry about back-and-forth licensing issues, allowing them to both share official content, engage in contests, and recreate dance videos.

There are rare exceptions to this allowance culture - and those are frequently rolled back. In March of 2013, K-pop entertainment agency Cube Entertainment, home of 4Minute and Hyuna, removed their artists’ videos for viewing by international fans (Benjamin, 2013). Cube Entertainment is actually one of the few Korean companies who work with a major U.S.- based label distributor, Universal Music Korea. Fans mobilized quickly, reporting that Universal was intending to “keep K-pop in Korea” and was subsequently blocking videos in the U.S. and U.K. Following a very vocal online opposition, including a meme campaign, the videos were re-posted to YouTube shortly afterwards and fans reported that Universal had corrected the mistake (Benjamin, 2013).

Copyright

Korean copyright law is similar to American law, although it differs in its practical application to online music sharing by individuals. Like in the United States, Korea filed criminal and civil charges against big file-sharing services during the Napster era (Leitner, 2008, p. 22-24). While Western music content owners spent energy and money prosecuting fans, Korean music content owners instead decided to engage with their fans (“Top Music Agency,” 2011). In 2008, Leitner stated, “the Korean music industry may have little choice but to persuade users to utilize industry-sanctioned channels of obtaining content rather than to seek to enforce copyright rights online” (Leitner, 2008, p. 54). Both content creators and fans use YouTube and other social media to promote and share music, serving as a bridge across these communities and avoiding the copyright-based animosity in the United States.

The difference between approaches to fans by music industries in the United States and Korea is primarily one based on culture - and choosing when to enforce laws against potential infringers, rather than based on the plain text of the law, considering how generally similar the laws are. The Korean Copyright Act (Copyright Act of Korea, 2013, articles 16-22) grants to creators a “bundle of rights” similar, but not exactly the same, as American copyright law (17 U.S.C. §106), including the right to reproduce, to prepare derivative works, to distribute copies, and the right of public performance. While there are “fair use” exceptions that apply to the types of use by individuals for music and music videos, they only apply to works that are not being distributed publicly, and therefore do not apply to the type of music sharing that occurs on social media (Copyright Act of Korea, article 29, 30). One notable difference is that use of many of the “fair use” exceptions requires attribution, the right of a creator to be listed as an author, which is not a requirement in U.S. copyright law (Copyright Act of Korea, article 12, 37).

What this means in practice is in the Western music industry when there are copyright considerations with differing rights, including potential licensing or copyright concerns, there are threats or actual litigation that may drag on for years, as discussed by Gardner (2014), placing continued online sharing in a precarious position – and leaving fans confused. However, on the other hand, when Korean pop music is pulled off of YouTube, as in the Cube Entertainment situation discussed by Benjamin (2013), fans mobilize and can direct their energies at the music label/licensing agency, and can get music back up quickly - and without litigation.

Conclusion

As interest in Korean pop continues to grow in the U.S. and other Western countries, it becomes a convenient narrative to consider acts like Psy (a Korean pop star whose 2012 “Gangnam Style” music video garnered over 2 billion views on YouTube) a one-hit wonder or brush off Girls’ Generation’s YouTube award win as a fluke. But this is, in fact, the outcome of a long thread of interactions and iterations between participatory communities, emerging social technologies, and a disrupted global music industry. The so-called “surprise” success of Korean Pop will happen again, and keep happening until the next evolution of this relationship occurs.

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