

## Translational Audiences in the Age of Transnational K-Pop

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This article examines how overseas audiences of K-pop are not only the end users but also directly engage with the translation of the cultural flow. The audiences participate in linguistic translation and furthermore negotiate and re-decode the linguistically translated texts. Acknowledging that the reception of foreign cultural content is open to continued cross-cultural decoding by different stakeholders, including audience members as well as cultural intermediaries, this article focuses on transnational audiences' engagement with two modes of cultural translation practices—producerly and semiotic translation. The article examines audiences' experiences of cultural translation and the reconfiguration of audiencehood in the era of transnational digital media.

*Keywords: transnational audience, K-pop, Korean Wave (Hallyu), cultural translation, producerly translation, semiotic translation, participatory culture, transmedia practice, user-generated content*

In recent transnational media flows, translation occurs as early as the media's designing and encoding phase and is far more complex than the exchange of different languages (Conway, 2012). For example, as Naficy's (2004) notion of "accented cinema" proposed, filmmakers of diasporic backgrounds may incorporate their acts of translation into the text they encode, and in so doing operate as cultural translators (as cited in Conway, 2012). Moreover, even after the initial translation of a cultural text in the encoding stage, the cultural intermediaries (e.g., news media, critics, and opinion leaders) contribute to the text's valuation in different contexts (Khaira, 2017). As observed in the rapid circulation of South Korean (Korean, hereafter) cultural content, known as the Korean Wave or Hallyu, transnational media flows involve complex processes of translation. The value chain of K-pop and K-dramas, from creation to consumption, has effectively incorporated translation as an integral process of transnational circulation. In the Korean Wave, creators, producers, and distributors have been attentive to the importance of translation in their encoding processes while taking advantage of digital convergence. On the one hand, the linguistic translation of K-dramas, Korean films, webtoons, and K-pop has increasingly been assisted by digital platforms in the distribution phase. On the other hand, audiences' participatory translation, such as commenting, reacting, and retranslating through digital platforms, has been indispensable, especially in the decoding phase (Jin,

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Yoon, & Min, 2021). Accelerated processes of media globalization and digital convergence have exponentially increased opportunities for audiences to encounter foreign cultural texts in their everyday contexts.

In media environments driven by globalization and digitalization, audiences are required to be *translational* both literally and metaphorically (Kustritz, 2016). In his study of Korean drama fan communities, Hu (2010) defined translation in fans' cultural consumption as involving "the encoding, decoding, and reencoding of texts across cultures" (p. 38), moving beyond the narrow boundary of linguistic translation. Expanding upon Hu's (2010) and several other scholars' attempts to address translational roles of audiences in transcultural or transnational contexts (e.g., Baruch, 2021; Conway, 2017; Hong, 2020; Jin et al., 2021; Lee, 2014; Yoon, 2017), this article presents an analysis of K-pop fan audiences' engagement with cultural translation. By doing so, the article shows how cultural translation has increasingly become an integral component in the recent development of the Korean Wave.

Linguistic translation, which is often available through subtitles on digital platforms, allows audiences to conveniently access foreign content and, in doing so, contributes to the construction of transcultural values and meanings, as exemplified in Hallyu media's recent global appeal through prompt and articulate strategies (Kiaer & Kim, 2022). However, the availability of linguistic translation (e.g., subtitles) does not guarantee the audience's attraction to particular transnational texts, such as K-pop and K-dramas. Though linguistic translation is a minimum requirement for transnational and transcultural media flows to reach overseas audiences, the audiences' valuation of the foreign content, through which its local relevance and meanings are explored and added to its linguistic translation, significantly affects the flows (Jin et al., 2021). Translation is not completed by rendering one language into another; it involves complex processes of meaning making and relocalization, which will be referred to as cultural translation in this article. When new cultural goods and genres are introduced to a foreign market, their values are constructed through interactions between different actors; this valuation process influences and involves the audience's engagement with the new cultural goods (Khaire, 2017). The value-construction processes offer a frame of reference for audiences who look for resources to interpret the goods produced especially in distant geocultural contexts.

Global audiences are not only the end users in the recent circulation of Korean media and popular culture but also add value to this cultural wave through their participatory acts (e.g., the sharing of user-generated content and semiotic activities). By illustrating that translation of foreign media is not necessarily completed at one point but, rather, is open to continued cross-cultural decoding by different stakeholders—particularly audiences who react to and engage with transnational media—this article proposes a preliminary discussion of a cultural translation framework for articulating audience studies. In particular, the study examines two types of cultural translation processes—content making (e.g., user-generated content such as reaction videos) and meaning making (e.g., decoding and reencoding by audiences)—which are interwoven.

### **Context and Methods**

As an emerging K-pop fan base, Canada is characterized by its ambivalent position—being a Western location yet struggling to seek its own cultural identity in relation to its neighboring global media superpower, the United States. K-pop is a rare non-English or non-French music genre that has successfully

penetrated the Canadian music market. More importantly, its fan base in Canada, like elsewhere, is growing. According to Google Trends Canada, the K-pop group BTS was searched far more than Canadian and global superstar Drake between mid-April and mid-August 2021, when BTS's global hit single "Butter" (BTS, 2021) was promoted. K-pop is a relatively recent arrival in Canada, compared with in the United States, and may still constitute a niche fan-based music sector. Canada's largest and public service broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), addressed the Korean Wave only sporadically until the late 2010s. As implied by a recent CBC article (Lau, 2019), K-pop began to be addressed relatively visibly in the Canadian news media only after BTS's remarkable success on North American charts in the late 2010s. Overall, the Canadian mainstream media's coverage of the Korean Wave was behind that of its U.S. counterparts (Yoon, 2019). The intensity of the Korean Wave in Canada may also be behind that of the Wave in the United States. Major K-pop songs' rankings on the Canadian charts have overall been lower than their rankings on the American charts. For example, BTS's mega-hit "Butter" (BTS, 2021), which was ranked number one on the American Billboard Hot 100 for 10 weeks, never made it to the top of the Canadian Billboard Hot 100 chart. In Canada, cultural commentaries on K-pop have only recently emerged. In this introductory phase of the Korean Wave in Canada, early audiences' decoding may be significant in constructing sociocultural meanings of this new cultural genre that originates in a non-Western context.

In this regard, it is important to examine how relatively early adopters of K-pop have responded to its translated content and created their own meanings. This article draws on my field studies of K-pop fan audiences in Canada. Between 2015 and 2017, I researched young people who had developed an affection for K-pop. By observing and speaking with young people of various cultural backgrounds, I sought to understand why and how they engage with K-pop and more widely the Korean Wave and how they make meanings from linguistically translated overseas content. This article draws on data from qualitative interviews with Canadian fan audiences of K-pop. The interviews were intended to examine young audiences who frequently access and consume K-pop. The interviewees were 27 young Canadians (aged between 16 and 30 years) from diverse ethnoracial backgrounds (18 Asian, eight White, and one other) and were predominantly female (all but two). The participants were recruited via online advertisements and snowballing. As this study focuses on cultural translation, Korean Canadians who were already familiar with the Korean language and culture since early childhood were not included.

The interview participants, whose accounts are introduced with their pseudonyms in this article, shared their experiences about their introduction to K-pop and other Korean popular culture content. As part of a larger project exploring the cultural meanings of global K-pop, the data analyzed in this article show how transnational audience practices can be considered as processes of cultural translation. Among several salient themes identified in the larger project, this article focused on young fan audiences' engagement with the cultural decoding of K-pop as translated foreign media content.

Though the participants' affection for K-pop was prevalent, the ways in which they expressed their affection varied. Some were more dedicated and expressive compared with others. Their interest in and affection for K-pop had also fluctuated over time. This variation may be influenced by several factors, including the social meanings attached to K-pop—often stigmatic and negative, especially in its early phase in Canada—and the digital media environments that allow the user to flexibly navigate different cultural styles without having a strong dedication to a particular cultural form (Jin et al., 2021). Thus, the participants

will be referred to as “fan audiences” in this study, rather than either fans or audiences. The term “fan audiences” helps to avoid the dichotomy between “passive audiences” and “active/spectacular fans”; it also inclusively captures various audiences who engage with Korean media overseas and identify themselves more or less as fans.

### **Producterly and Semiotic Modes of Cultural Translation**

Although the concept of cultural translation has been introduced in recent media research (Conway, 2017), its application is still nascent. Given the concept’s emphasis on exchanges and negotiation of cultural meanings, it may be comparable to the cultural studies concept of decoding (Hall, 1973), cultural consumption (Fiske, 1992), or participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). The cultural translation concept can serve to articulate the cultural studies of media audiences—the encoding–decoding model in particular (Conway, 2017). The encoding–decoding model (Hall, 1973) emerged during the pre-Internet era and has contributed to analyzing primarily national or local audiences’ consumption of television messages. The encoding–decoding model explored audiences’ engagement in productive work under certain conditions, which are “supplied both by the text, the producing institution and by the history of the audience” (Morley, 1989, p. 19). The model’s emphasis on audiences’ productive roles has been influential in the development of active audience studies. In particular, theses on audiences’ cultural consumption (Fiske, 1992) and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) have further articulated discussions about audiences’ agency.

Building on the existing framework of active audience studies, the cultural translation concept engages with transnational and transcultural aspects of media circulation, in which a text made in another context gains new values and meanings for a new audience (Conway, 2017). The lens of cultural translation can contribute to effectively analyzing how audiences’ relationship with and negotiation of media are constructed across different cultural contexts. In so doing, it articulates a transnational angle for audience studies. While a limited number of media researchers have explicitly used the concept of cultural translation, media audience studies have examined how audiences negotiate transcultural content and participate in translation processes (e.g., Conway, 2013, 2017; Cruz, Seo, & Binay, 2021; Jin et al., 2021; Tuominen, 2019). In particular, media audience experiences have been seen as translational practices in a few recent studies of the Korean Wave (Cruz et al., 2021; Hu, 2010; Lee, 2014; Oh, 2017a, 2017b; Yoon, 2017). These studies can be categorized into two different streams of research according to what phases and aspects of decoding are emphasized more. The first stream focuses more on the audience’s *content* making in the process of cultural translation, whereas the second explores the audience’s *meaning* making, such as the transaction and transformation of meanings. These two streams can be named, respectively, a “producterly translation” framework and a “semiotic translation” framework.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These terms are inspired by Fiske’s (1992) discussion of pop culture fans’ consumption activities. According to Fiske (1992), pop culture fans have semiotic, enunciative, and textual productivity and thus operate as productive consumers. In the present article, producterly translation refers to audiences’ translation activities that engage with textual productivity (e.g., fan text production), whereas semiotic translation is defined as the audiences’ activities of “making meanings of social identity and of social experiences from the semiotic resources” of translation (Fiske, 1992, p. 37).

First, *the producerly translation framework* examines how and why user-generated content contributes to making transnational meanings of the Korean Wave (Cruz et al., 2021; Hu, 2010; Lee, 2014). According to Hu's (2010) observation of Asian American fans' "affective translation" in K-drama online forums, the fans retell the narrative of K-drama episodes ("renarrativization") and, in doing so, "relive the pleasures of the original serial" (p. 41). In this process of renarrativization, dedicated audiences not only revise professional subtitles (translated by the distributor) to further contextualize the original content with nuances, but they also decode and participate in the original stories through various enunciative activities, such as retelling, replaying, and discussing the show. Indeed, dedicated fans may feel that traditional subtitles cause the "erasure" of cultural differences rather than facilitate readers' creative engagement with the text (Hu, 2010). Hu's (2010) study conducted in the prestreaming service era revealed how fans retranslated DVD distributors' rigid and "authoritative" subtitles and further affectively re-signified the cultural differences and nuances inscribed in the original texts. In a similar vein, Lee (2014) examined K-drama fans' episode recapitulation (recap) as an audience-driven practice of mediating and translating source text. According to this study, recap practices among Anglophone fans of K-dramas do not only include plot summaries; they also include the recapper's analysis, updates on the stars, and translation of other relevant materials.

A more recent observation of fans' producerly translation was conducted by Cruz, Seo, and Binay's (2021) study examining Anglophone K-pop fans' production of paratexts—especially fan subtitles and reaction videos. They found that fans' practices in the global circulation of K-pop not only assisted non-Korean consumers in decoding the semiotic codes of K-pop texts but also contributed to overseas fans' reinscription of their transcultural identities. According to the study, K-pop fans' cultural translation "facilitates the transcultural intelligibility and cultural globalization of peripheral cultural products" (Cruz et al., 2021, p. 643). In a similar vein, Choi's (2015) study of Latin American K-pop fandom addressed K-pop cover dancers as a "performative deconstruction whereby the popularised dances of the K-pop industry are turned into a shared cultural property" (p. 112). Overall, studies from the producerly translation framework address fans' reactive content creation in the transnational flows of Korean media and suggest that active audiences' roles affect the dynamism of different forms of cultural localization and negotiation.

Second, the other stream of research—the *semiotic translation framework*—engages more with the ways in which audiences negotiate *meanings* around the original Korean texts and thus redefine their own identities. Jin et al.'s (2021) monograph that observes various overseas fans' consumption of Korean Wave content adopts the concept of translation to explore the processes in which consumers' semiotic productivity, or meaning-making ability (Fiske, 1992), is exercised. They focused on K-pop fans' efforts to engage in and appreciate the K-pop texts in their local contexts. In this study, cultural translation is characterized by the process of audience-led grassroots localization, through which multiple meanings associated with original media texts are negotiated. In particular, Latin American fans of K-pop, who had limited access to prompt translation from Korean to Spanish, experienced a relative time lag vis-à-vis linguistic translation and available merchandise. According to Jin et al.'s (2021) study, because of the time lags and relative lack of infrastructure for K-pop consumer culture in Latin America (especially compared with North American metropolitan areas), some Spanish-speaking fans relied on English translation and subtitles to gain quicker access. Jin et al. (2021) argued that this "secondhand translation" ironically enabled a creative and

recontextualized process of fans' meaning creation, as the time lag allowed them room for further imagination and participation.

Semiotic translation processes generate various meanings of foreign content and serve to explore audiences' identities and their negotiation of social contexts. Oh's (2017a, 2017b) textual analyses of Western YouTube reactors to K-pop music videos explored how racial power hierarchies may operate in the cultural translation of non-White cultural texts by Anglophone K-pop fans. According to these studies, White YouTubers have the relative power to fetishize K-pop and are not free of dominant discourses of color blindness (Oh, 2017a), whereas Black fans engage with K-pop as a polycultural resource for creating the hybrid identity that may be performed outside the gaze of Whiteness (Oh, 2017b). That is, fans' cultural translation of K-pop can serve to reproduce a dominant racial order (as shown in some White fans' cases) or to question White-oriented color blindness (Oh, 2017b). Yoon's (2017) study of K-pop fans in Canada also addressed ethnoracial factors in the reception of transnational cultural content. According to this study, young people of Asian backgrounds reflexively reappropriated and negotiated the racialized meanings attached to K-pop in the Canadian context; however, admiring K-pop idols as the model of a self-developing, entrepreneurial self, Asian Canadian youth also internalized neoliberal subjectivity.

It should be noted that these two cultural translation frameworks are often interwoven. Fans' user-generated content production (i.e., producerly translation) involves semiotic engagement (i.e., semiotic translation), and vice versa. That is, active audiences consume foreign content through various cultural translation practices—not only decoding but also creating content and meanings. Illustrating these processes that are identified in the existing studies of cultural translation, the following sections will explore how K-pop audiences engage with different, yet interwoven processes of translation. Drawing on young fans' accounts, overseas audiences' practices and efforts to culturally decode K-pop will be discussed. To better understand the context of cultural translation among the K-pop audiences in this study, the next section begins with the discussion of Canadian-based fans' perception of the geocultural differences inscribed in K-pop, which will be followed by an analysis of different modes of cultural translation among fans.

### **Translating Cultural Differences**

The remainder of this article explores how the two types of cultural translation are observed among young fan audiences of K-pop in Canada. Before getting to that analysis, it is worth examining how translation processes are perceived by fans. The K-pop fans interviewed for this study revealed that cultural translation might not only supplement but also transcend linguistic translation. For them, processes of audience-led translation constituted an integral element in the Korean Wave. The fans sought to negotiate this difference through linguistic and cultural translation processes.

The meanings of K-pop are in the making among young people in the Canadian context. According to the interviewees, foreignness in the language and visual components of K-pop might prevent general (nonfan) audiences from accessing this new cultural genre. Language and racial barriers are common factors that marginalize K-pop and the Korean Wave in the eyes of some (nonfan) audiences in Canada. These language and racial barriers are often interwoven. For example, reluctance to listen to a song in a non-Western language might not be free of the Eurocentric cultural tastes that racialize non-Western music (Jin

et al., 2021). Sydney, a 20-year-old White fan, commented on her peers who were ignorant of K-pop: "I just know a lot of Caucasian people don't listen to different music because they can't understand the language. So they don't want to go through that." Similarly, Leisha, a 19-year-old of East Asian heritage, recalled the day when she told her White friend, a non-K-pop fan, that she liked K-pop. She noted:

I told her that I liked K-pop and she was like "Why? You don't understand their music." That's because she listens to a lot of English rap. (Interviewer: Can you guess why she might have said so?) I assume she doesn't like K-pop because it's just Korean. She didn't like it because she didn't understand the lyrics.

For Leisha's White friend, K-pop remained enigmatic cultural content because it was written in a particular language. Meanwhile, according to Kierra, a 19-year-old of East Asian heritage and a fan of K-pop, her (nonfan) friends' ignorance of K-pop is derived from their racialization of K-pop idols as those who are not aligned with heteronormative gender identity: "K-pop stars wear makeup and stuff, and when I tell my friends that, they just think it's weird how guys wear makeup and care about this sort of thing." Though this negative assessment is not limited to White youth, Kierra noted that her "Western" friends, referring to her peers of non-Asian heritage, are particularly hostile to the visual difference of Asian idols. She suspected that this lack of understanding of K-pop's visual features may reflect racial segregation among Canadian youth. "Race does sort of play a part in it. I don't really have a lot of Western friends who are into K-pop," Kierra stated. Because of the assumed racial barrier, the nonfans that the interview participants referred to may not develop their interest in K-pop despite the increasing availability of linguistic translations of Korean content (e.g., subtitles).

In contrast with the general audience who might not necessarily be attracted to the difference of K-pop, the young fans interviewed for this study were exposed to alternative ways of translating the difference. To develop a greater understanding of source texts (without being necessarily reliant on official translations), the fans tried to appreciate the Korean lyrics of their favorite K-pop songs. Despite the increasing availability of English translations of K-pop lyrics, many interviewees wanted to learn the Korean language to appreciate the cultural texts and feel more connected with their favorite idols and their worlds. Leisha stated, "I was trying to [get] over the language barrier and trying to learn Korean just so I could stop waiting for the English translation." Like Leisha, several interviewees considered it important to develop an understanding of K-pop through efforts of linguistic translation. While some respondents accessed and were satisfied with subtitles that were made available by original content providers/distributors or bilingual fans, other respondents were keen to access and appreciate the authentic feelings attached to the original language of K-pop songs and the idols' dialogues. The latter wanted to connect directly with the universe of K-pop rather than simply following the lead of dedicated bilingual fans or relying on the official translations available via the content distributors. Natalie, a 20-year-old of South Asian background and a K-pop fan, stated:

I'll search up the lyrics, the Romanized lyrics, and I'll end up seeing the translated lyrics. But if it's a song I feel, like, *Oh there's a deeper meaning behind it*, like Ailee's songs or G-Dragon's songs, then I'll look them up just to see what the artist is trying to convey. (. . .) I remember it was on G-Dragon's song "Crooked," a person who's Korean said what the song actually means. And it means so much more [than the English translation]; it means struggle and whatnot. And it made me realize, *Oh shoot. I guess you can't really truly understand K-pop or Korean music unless you understand the language, and you can actually, like, hook up all the words and whatnots.*

Several interviewees, particularly more dedicated fans, emphasized the importance of understanding the language and context behind what is seen on a music video. In transnational media flows, audiences may "find it difficult to identify with the style, values, beliefs, institutions and behavioral patterns of the material in question" (Hoskins & Mirus 1988, p. 500). Narrative media forms (e.g., TV dramas) and other audiovisual media forms (e.g., K-pop) may involve several types of cultural translation and potentially different degrees of cultural discount. Compared with narrative media content (such as K-dramas), K-pop as a visualized musical form may not involve a large degree of cultural discount that results from the diminished appeal of a particular text rooted in one culture when it appears in another cultural context (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015). Some interviewees noted that they would be intrigued by K-pop even without the availability of translated lyrics, whereas they hardly watched K-dramas if subtitles are not available. It is not surprising that overseas audiences seek subtitles to follow the narratives and storylines of TV shows. Compared with narrative media forms, K-pop as a seminarrative text can offer young viewers various ways of decoding the text, by filling in the gaps from their own interpretation and meaning making, even when subtitles are not available or when the subtitles fail to deliver the nuances of the lyrics or visual cues of its music video.

Whether learning the language or not, the fans often tried to sing along with their favorite K-pop songs and appreciate the music. Inaya, a 20-year-old fan of a South Asian background, noted that although she was learning Korean, the language itself might not necessarily be a barrier in transnational reception of K-pop. She stated,

Music itself is a language. So, when you listen to it, there are different things that someone can be looking for. Oftentimes, you would hear people say, "Oh, I listen to music just for the beat." (. . .) But there are some people who specifically want to look for a message. So, depending on what you're going for, I don't think there would be a huge difference in your experience. If you like it, you just like it (laughs).

For the overseas fan audiences who participate in the process of linguistic and cultural translation, these signs of difference are transformed into attraction through cultural translation practices, as further discussed in the following sections. Lucy, a 20-year-old White fan in Vancouver, noted: "BTS talks about the themes of youth and invincibility and stuff like that, whereas, I think, Western music doesn't really capture that. At least mainstream, mainstream pop music doesn't capture in the same way BTS does." As studies of Hallyu audiences have shown, the difference inscribed in Korean popular cultural forms can offer overseas audiences room for imagination and engagement (Carranza, Kim, & No, 2014; Jin et al., 2021).



In consuming cultural difference inscribed in K-pop, the fan audiences may simultaneously feel “familiar differences” and “strange similarities” in the K in K-pop (Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021).

### **Producerly Translation**

The “familiar differences” of K-pop idols and K-pop (Cicchelli & Octobre 2021) can offer overseas fans multiple entry points for audience engagement, which includes producerly and semiotic processes of cultural translation. The fans in a context that is geoculturally distant from the birthplace of K-pop have limited linguistic and cultural knowledge to immediately interpret new music videos. However, because of the time lag and knowledge gap, they need to participate in the decoding process more actively (even before the arrival of official translations). The interview participants’ desire to understand the language and cultural cues in K-pop songs, music videos, and idols’ social media messages encouraged them to share their thoughts on K-pop in various forums, online and offline gatherings, and reactive videos (Cho, 2017). In particular, reaction videos and cover dance videos constitute a significant component of international K-pop fans’ cultural translations or efforts to decode the cultural content made in Korea. Some interviewees not only visited but also posted their comments on K-pop-related sites. Moreover, several interviewees created and posted their reactions. Hugo, a 20-year-old interviewee of South Asian background, regularly uploaded K-pop reaction videos and video comments on K-pop-related issues to a YouTube channel:

We react to many different YouTube videos . . . uh, K-pop music videos, and what we’re going into right now is talking about our perspectives and our opinions on K-pop-related articles that we found on, like, Soompi and Allkpop, and we love to put our spin—our comedic spin—on it too.

In the reaction-video culture, the K-pop text is renegotiated through each fan’s own participation and performance. By revealing their desires to watch and to be watched, the reactors create, edit, upload, and share their videos on digital platforms. In doing so, they also encourage other fans’ participation (Swan, 2018). K-pop fans’ reaction content seems to show the ways in which they cross-culturally decode K-pop and explore meanings that are beyond the translated lyrics, which are often available along with the video. Numerous fans have launched K-pop reaction-video channels, and some of them have become microcelebrities. Reaction-video making is a process of decoding, and maximizing the pleasure of, unfamiliar foreign texts. When asked about the motivation behind reaction-video making, Naomi, a 20-year-old crew member of a K-pop-related YouTube channel for fans, simply stated, “We just wanna have fun and show people that K-pop is fun.” Molly, a 20-year-old student who liked to watch K-pop fan reaction videos but was “too shy” to produce her own, explained how recording and watching reactions can be a process of decoding foreign texts: “Because you wanna see if they had the same reaction as you did. So, like, if they were also shocked or they also like the music just as much as you did.” The production of reaction videos often involves the cultural decoding of the original texts from their own local perspectives. Generating commentary on foreign, non-Western cultural texts may imply political meanings; it can reproduce the existing Orientalist views on non-Western culture (Oh, 2017a, 2017b). Otherwise, it can be a “creative intervention that resists the reproduction of Eurocentric ideologies in the digital realm through individuals’ uses of voice and visibility” (Swan, 2018, p. 5).

In addition to reaction videos, there are other types of use-generated content related to K-pop and the Korean Wave. For example, as Naomi noted, her team makes several types of fan videos. The fans sing K-pop song covers or do dance covers, and they create quiz videos. When speaking about her K-pop song cover, Naomi commented:

We've uploaded an English cover of a Korean song. That either has rapping or singing. And then we just do kinda random stuff, so we've done a "Would You Rather" video that has Korean pop culture questions in it. (Interviewer: For example?) I think one of the questions I came up with was "Would you rather have a sleepover with APink, or would you rather have a sleepover with Sistar?"

Dance cover-video making is another example of producerly cultural translation. By replicating the original choreography, fans personify the star (Kang, 2014) and bodily decode the messages and images of the original text. Several interviewees in the present study were members of local K-pop dance teams that practice and record their K-pop performance. While "dance covers" literally mean to copy the original text, the fans' performance and its recording reveal producerly translation processes through which the original choreography text is replayed and renegotiated through different performers. Moreover, as shown in numerous K-pop dance cover videos, fan performances are shot in available local spaces (from their own bedrooms to local/national landmarks). In doing so, cover dance-video culture reveals the process of localization through which the original text is resituated and re-signified in a different local context (Liew, 2013). Furthermore, despite the perfectly replicated choreography, along with lip sync (i.e., 100% identical with the original), the fan performer's identity markers, such as gender, race, and age, may not be removed. Thus, the locality of performative audiences is not obscured but rather reemerges through the process of consuming K-pop.

Linguistic and geocultural barriers paradoxically offer overseas audiences opportunities to participate in cultural translation and in so doing increase the multiplicity of interpretation of the original text (Yoon, 2019). Relatively dedicated fans tend to pursue producerly translation—that is, cultural translation and decoding through the production and sharing of user-generated content. Overseas fans' emotional investment and participation involve active fan labor. These emotional and labor-intensive investments, such as fan-subbing and fan recapitulation, increasingly enable them to identify with their fan object—K-pop—and other K-pop fans (Duffett, 2013). Fans' participatory and translational activities often involve an affective process through which fans organize moments of stable identity and feel "at home" with what they care about (Grossberg, 1992, p. 60; see also Hu, 2010). Fans' producerly translation through digital platforms shows that amateur translation and reaction to translated and/or original content challenge the discourse of authentic translation that emphasizes textual accuracy and word-for-word fidelity. Dwyer (2012) views user-generated translation as a productive practice of "chaos" that facilitates fans' agency and participation in media presumption. As scholars of digital fan studies under the influence of Fiske (1992) have argued, producerly translation contributes to adding value to the original text while reshaping the participating audience's identities (Baruch, 2021; Jenkins, 2006). Nevertheless, forms and degrees of fan audiences' engagement with producerly translation may vary, and thus, further investigation is required (Hills, 2013).

### **Semiotic Translation**

Reactive content making has become increasingly popular among K-pop fans overseas (Cho, 2017; Swan, 2018). However, many fan audiences' decoding processes remain in a semiotic translation phase, rather than rigorously engaging in producerly translation through content making. Indeed, while most research participants made an effort to explore the meanings from translated or original K-pop content, only some of them explicitly and continuously produced fan content. Compared with producerly translation practices that include audiences' reactive content making, semiotic translation engages with multilayered processes of cultural decoding. Fan audiences as semiotic translators make their own meanings of K-pop, especially through their interactions with each other on digital platforms. By participating in valuation or commentary processes, they decode the original content or the already linguistically translated content in their daily contexts. Moving beyond top-down translation processes led by media corporations and professional translators, overseas fan audiences develop meaningful connections with K-pop that are not simply defined by geocultural differences but, instead, are redefined by versatility and relevance (Jin et al., 2021; Jung, 2011).

Semiotic practices of redefining K-pop are especially observed in fans' reception of K-pop idols as alternatively appealing star figures. While K-pop idols' visual components, such as male idols' makeup, may not be favorably received by nonfans, the fans in the present study accepted these different attributes as a unique attraction of this new cultural genre. The interviewees familiarized themselves with the nonheteronormative images of male K-pop idols. Julia, a 19-year-old fan of K-pop group Seventeen, appreciated the group's versatility and, in doing so, implicitly questioned the existing stereotypes of K-pop idols.

When we [my friend and I] saw Seventeen live, we were, like, screaming the whole time, and they looked beautiful. Like, holy cow! They looked really good. And they're just really talented as a group. Their music is, like, the difference. I like when they change from soft and calm to hardcore fighting songs.

As Julia pointed out, the visual differences signified by K-pop and its idols are considered open in their meanings, especially for fans who are beginning to explore the attractive features of this new cultural genre. For the fans, idols are alternatively attractive and talented young celebrities. In this regard, many respondents enjoyed the diverse aspects of K-pop idols rather than stereotyping them as the Other of mainstream Western pop stars. The respondents' accounts resonate with Jung's (2011) notion of versatile masculinity, which refers to a multilayered, culturally mixed, and strategically manufactured form of masculinity that is observed in recent transnational flows of Korean idols' representation. In contrast with the Western media's representation of K-pop as inauthentic, foreign, and repetitive commodities (Seabrook, 2012), most fans in the study enjoyed the versatility of K-pop rather than reducing it to a fixed, homogeneous group of Korean-made pop music. Indeed, the versatility of K-pop music and videos has been considered a key attribute of K-pop's global appeal (Choi, 2015; Jung, 2011).

The processes of semiotic translation involve interactions between fan audience members of different backgrounds. Fans' collaborative meaning making is often initiated and/or further facilitated by

particular fans, such as bilingual, long-term, or microcelebrity fans who frequently contribute to online discussions. The research participants—especially the long-term fans—recognized bilingual fans who shared their fan subtitles and interpretations through YouTube or other social media channels. Jamie, a 23-year-old fan, spoke about a fan who uploaded detailed analyses of K-pop songs and music videos:

There was one YouTuber, who was so good. She had a full breakdown of what the scene is about (. . .) it was all out there. So, I was writing all that down. (. . .) That's how it worked.

In this manner, Jamie learned about not only K-pop texts but also their context. She sometimes asked the YouTuber, or other viewers through the comments section, questions when she needed further clarification. In this manner, fan audiences' feedback and discussions contribute to meaning making around transnational K-pop.

As discussed earlier in this article, cultural translation engages with the valuation processes required for the transnational consumption of cultural content that is relatively unfamiliar to overseas audiences (Khaire, 2017). While the valuation processes involve diverse stakeholders, including creators, producers, distributors, and consumers, a significant role is played by cultural intermediaries who evaluate the content between the production and consumption of the content (Khaire, 2017). Among various cultural intermediaries, the Canadian news media has not offered sufficient commentaries on K-pop and the Korean Wave. Instead, according to the research participants, social media and digital platforms seem to play a significant role. The fans commonly accessed their favorite idols' social media accounts (e.g., Twitter accounts) or other online sites to be updated about idols' news. Some fan sites aggregate and translate K-pop-related information (e.g., Soompi, Allkpop, and Netizenbuzz). Inaya, a 20-year-old fan in Toronto, followed her favorite K-pop celebrities through various digital platforms. For her, Twitter was "a way to relate to them [the celebrities] on a personal basis." By following idols' social media, she found out that "They're going out too (laughs). They eat food too (laughs)." She also used Netizenbuzz (<http://netizenbuzz.blogspot.com>), a fan-based blog that translates Korean pop culture-related news and Korean netizens' comments:

I go on Netizenbuzz to see what's going on . . . like what kind of drama is going on in the K-pop world or just, like, among Korean actors and stuff. There are Korean articles that come out, and Korean fans will comment on those certain things. And they translate their comments and show you what they're . . . what the K-netizens are saying. So, it's really interesting seeing the Korean netizens' points of view on certain celebrities that you also like.

In this manner, online fan forums, as well as idols' own social media accounts, allow overseas audiences to decode the text *and* context of K-pop, including the ways in which particular idols and their music are consumed in Korea.

Overseas audiences of Korean media have relied on digital platforms and social media, through which the prompt, open, and continuously revisable fan translation (fan-subbing) of Korean content is

enabled and shared widely. Several fans interviewed in 2015 frequently used Facebook, whereas a greater variety of social media platforms, including Twitter and Instagram, were mentioned in a later period of the field studies. In an interview in 2015, Mia, a 17-year-old active Facebook user and K-pop fan, described Facebook as “a very generalized platform now,” and then added: “It allows us to do a lot of stuff on its platform so people just kind of default assume that Facebook is the best for sharing and contacting people.” As such, Mia and her fellow fans contributed to the valuation of K-pop in the relatively early phase of its introduction to Canada. The fans’ semiotic translation through transmedia practices can be compared with the top-down translation offered by mainstream traditional media (such as network TV), an allegedly “authoritative” interpretation and translation system, which is rarely or only gradually revisable (Dwyer, 2012). Digital platforms targeting Korean Wave fans, such as Viki and V-Live, which are often used synergistically along with other digital media forms, have increasingly allowed users to comment and share their feelings with other users and eventually contribute to the valuation of K-pop overseas.

The K-pop fans’ semiotic translation processes may not be separated from the producerly translation process. Moreover, the fans’ digital literacy seems essential to both producerly and semiotic processes of cross-cultural decoding of K-pop. Their reactive content facilitates different modes of decoding. The fan audiences collaboratively produce contextualized commentaries from below, which are distinguished from the commentaries produced by traditional cultural intermediaries (such as critics and journalists). For the interview participants in the study, other fans’ comments on a new K-pop video seemed to influence how they understood new materials. The role of the mainstream media or professional critics as conventional cultural intermediaries is largely replaced with that of ordinary fans who participate in reactive culture and share their own views through digital media. Digital platforms, increasingly playing the role of cultural intermediaries (Bilton, 2017), allow overseas fan audiences to explore and construct meanings of the new cultural genre of K-pop (Hu, 2010; Jin et al., 2021). Although semiotic translation benefits from transmedia environments, digital media’s affordances may restrict the ways in which fans make meanings of K-pop. Popular digital platforms driven by corporate interests serve to commodify the users’ participatory activities (De Kosnik, 2012). Moreover, the filter bubble effect of digital media—Internet interface drawing on highly personalized algorithms—may discourage the user from accessing diverse interpretations (Pariser, 2011). Thus, semiotic translation, which facilitates participatory and productive practices of cultural consumption, involves dilemmas of whose meanings are shared and how they are shared through—and in negotiation with—existing dominant digital architectures.

### Conclusion

This article has suggested that transnational media audiences are inevitably *translational* as they increasingly engage in the participatory processes of user-content and meaning making. Global digital platforms allow audiences to constantly access transnational media texts by providing translational tools, such as multiple language subtitles and dubbing services. However, the translational infrastructure enabled by digital platforms may not guarantee the wide and sustainable circulation of a particular cultural form. For example, the increasing availability of foreign language subtitles for K-pop song lyrics and music videos on YouTube may not necessarily entail the overseas audience’s interest in this relatively unfamiliar cultural content. As noted by the interview participants’ experiences with their (nonfan) peers, some audience

members may still be resistant to cultural content made in a non-Western context. That is, the extensive availability of linguistic translations alone may not accomplish the positive valuation processes of a new, foreign cultural genre. Cultural translation by various stakeholders, including fan audiences, is required for the transnational circulation of new cultural content.

In light of the increasing importance of polysemic processes of decoding unfamiliar cultural texts in the age of digital platforms and global K-pop, this article has examined transnational audience experiences in context. In particular, it has identified two modes of cultural translation practices—producerly and semiotic translation—through which audience members generate reactive content and/or cultural meanings of the content. The fans' participatory processes of user-content making and semiotic exploration show that "the 'agents' of cultural translation" are not "the privileged polyglot elite but every single one of us" (Maitland, 2017, p. 26). K-pop fan audiences' cultural translation illustrates how unfamiliar media texts are decoded *and* eventually reencoded from below in different local contexts. It should be emphasized that the audience is comprised of various cultural groups, among which different narratives and meanings are negotiated. For example, several empirical analyses of K-pop fans have revealed racial tensions between overseas fans (Oh, 2017a; Yoon, 2019) or tensions between domestic and international fans (Berbiguier & Cho, 2017).

Through the application of the cultural translation framework, this article proposed advancement in the existing audience studies as well as Korean Wave studies. As discussed in this article, transnational audiences become performative cultural translators who engage with other cultures. The audiences' experiences of cultural translation show the reconfiguration of audiencehood in the era of transnational digital media. In the age of global K-pop, audiences not only decode media messages but also create their own (reactive) texts and meanings through increasing transcultural and transmedia experiences.

As shown by a growing number of Western fans who sing along to Korean songs, the processes of cultural translation involve the ethics of encountering others in transnational cultural flows (Conway, 2013; Maitland, 2017). Cultural exchanges between two or more contexts are likely to be asymmetric in terms of meaning and power. The power asymmetry may facilitate inquiries into the existing power relations as the "impossibility of absolute sameness in translation" offers the possibility for "non-hierarchical openness and movements of meaning and identity" (Longinovic, 2002, pp. 7–8). In this regard, further studies are required to explore how audiences of transnational media engage with counter-hegemonic moments through their participation in translational practices.

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