The Cambridge Companion to K-Pop

How did Korea come to create a vibrant pop culture scene that would enthrall not only young Asian fans but also global audiences from diverse racial and generational backgrounds? From idol training to fan engagement, from studio recording to mastering choreographic sequences, what are the steps that go into the actual production and promotion of K-pop? And how can we account for K-pop’s global presence within the rapidly changing media environment and consumerist culture in the new millennium? As an informed guide for finding answers to these questions, The Cambridge Companion to K-Pop probes the complexities of K-pop as both a music industry and a transnational cultural scene. It investigates the meteoric ascent of K-pop against the backdrop of increasing global connectivity wherein a distinctive model of production and consumption is closely associated with creativity and futurity.

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Anyone working on popular culture knows well that time is at once their best friend and worst enemy. In the fast-changing world of pop culture, every day offers scholars a windfall of new materials to swim in, but with each minute’s passing they also become inevitably outdated. No matter how hard one tries, one can never have a full and comprehensive perspective on something evolving so quickly. My collaborators whose work is highlighted in this volume saved me from being outdated or, at least, helped slow down the pace. Thanks to their fresh perspectives and keen insights, they inspired me to examine this dynamic field with a renewed appreciation and a much deeper understanding.

Qianxiong Yang was a smart and reliable editorial assistant, who stepped in to provide much needed help. Thanks to Stephanie Sakson, whose editorial work improved the book, and to Abi Sears, who patiently guided me through each step of the production process. Kate Brett first presented the idea of making this book, for which I am grateful. A Korea Foundation Small Grant supported the production of the index and funded a series of online lectures, allowing me to feel a sense of community during the difficult days of the Covid-19 pandemic. Particular thanks go to Chungmin Lee, who supported this endeavor in many way, both big and small.

Researching K-pop requires one to repeatedly renew their perspective. It is like chasing a storm that leaves you strides behind. Day after day, minute after minute, new songs are released and fresh faces step into limelight. But my media-savvy students are always ahead of me, and writing this book is my belated gesture to acknowledge their contribution to the field of K-pop. This book is dedicated to my students, past, present, and future.
Notes to Readers

- For transliteration of Korean words, the volume will consistently use the official Korean language Romanization system released by South Korea’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2000, also referred to as Revised Romanization of Korean. Exceptions are made for proper names well known in the English-speaking world by alternate Romanizations (e.g. Lee Soo-man rather than Yi Su-man); for authors who published their names in alternate Romanizations (e.g. Suk-Young Kim rather than Suk-yeong Gim); for performers who deliberately use alternate Romanizations for their names (e.g. Lee Hi rather than Yi Ha-i).
- Although East Asian convention dictates that surnames precede given names (e.g. Lee So-Rim), in this volume, East Asian names appear with the given name first followed by surnames (e.g. So-Rim Lee). Exceptions are made for stage names and artistic names, which have been widely used in the music and entertainment industry (e.g. Bang Si-hyuk rather than Si-hyuk Bang).
- K-pop band names like BLACKPINK or Agust D are left in their own Anglicized spellings since they deliberately use idiosyncratic spellings for professional purposes and are known as such in both Korean and international media.
- All translations not otherwise credited are contributor’s own.
- When quoting others’ work, author’s use the transliteration system originally chosen by other authors.
Introduction

Korea’s Moment in the Limelight

SUK-YOUNG KIM

Vibrant colors, swaggering idols, and enthralled arena. Constellations of fans who exude transformative energy that buoys the brilliance of the moment. Jovial melodies on heart-racing tracks. Hooks that rush straight to your memory. A shining light has been illuminating the K-pop stage since the dawn of the millennium. What started out as a local craze has now become a truly global phenomenon. The interest in various K-pop bands and their prolific performances has only intensified over the years. What magnetic forces are at work to elate the worldwide fan community and heighten the splendor of the constantly evolving scene called K-pop?

The versatility of K-pop has always made it difficult to box the genre into one or a few categorical definitions. For those hoping to grasp this ever-morphing cultural scene, any single classification of it will be too constricting. For some Koreans, K-pop became an epicenter for rallying ethnocentric pride, touting the growing influence of Korean culture worldwide. For other Koreans, it is a symptomatic ailment of the media-saturated youth of today. For the Asian diasporic community, it carries the refreshing banner of Asian cool. For some critics in the West, K-pop idols have reconfirmed their long-standing prejudice against Asians as mechanical, machinelike disciplinarians devoid of humanity. For the dedicated fandom, K-pop has enabled an unprecedented degree of community building, whereas for the business community, it has presented a prime case of branding and marketing in the age of the metaverse.

The many faces of K-pop have invited scholarly scrutiny, often directed toward unpacking the manifold meanings of the “K” in K-pop. Elsewhere, I introduced the new phrase “keyboard/keypad” pop as a way to emphasize the centrality of digital consumerism in the K-pop world, as most of this music consumption takes place via digital platforms; “Kleenex pop” to emphasize the quick turnover of top songs and trends; and “ketchup pop” to indicate their manufactured taste and flavor. And never to be forgotten, Korea looms large behind “K,” sustaining the conversation on how K-pop can buoy a nation’s soft power beyond everyone’s wildest dreams.¹ Who would have imagined that it would take a glitzy pop music scene to
transform one nation’s public image from a war-torn country into a trendy hub of popular culture in less than half a century?

While many discussions have taken place around the range of meanings of “K,” the “pop” side of K-pop has been given less critical treatment.² To be fair, “pop” holds an equal share with “K” in gauging the genre’s supple soundscape. Dominating the sonic spread of K-pop are American pop (most notably teen pop, bubblegum pop) heavily infused with all sorts of global music trends of the twentieth century (hip hop, R&B, gospel, jazz, rock, swing). K-pop also harnesses a broader range of “pop,” including Eurodance music and J-pop trends, among the increasing streak of traditional Korean musical themes.

But the most crucial ingredient in “pop” is ironically what is missing in rock music. For its rapacious adaptability, the “pop” in K-pop connotes passing trends at best, standing as a marker of triviality, which is often projected as the diametric opposite of “rock authenticity.” The lack of awareness of K-pop’s rising influence or, even worse, open prejudice against music from Asia often prompts critics of K-pop to label it as factory-manufactured music.

The rock/pop contrast is nothing new and existed long before K-pop entered the global music scene as a major force. Richard Middleton pointed to how the field of musicology has repeatedly confronted the tenuous relationship between rock authenticity and the suspicious validity of “pop” music:

> Within popular music culture, the discourse of authenticity is familiar. Typically, it is taken to mark out the genuine from the counterfeit, the honest from the false, the original from the copy, roots from surface – oppositions which in turn often map on to further distinctions: feeling as against pretense, acoustic as against electric, subculture as against mainstream, people as against industry, and so on.³

The oppositions listed here characterize the dichotomization of rock versus pop. This bifurcation denotes the idea that pop music cannot stand the test of time. It sits on a pressurized time clock that will shortly announce that it is high time for this passing trend to pop. To this effect, John Lie likewise indicated that the term “‘popular’ almost always signifies the less prestigious in a series of binary distinctions; elite, high, or refined against mass, low, or vulgar.”⁴

But underneath such condescending discourse on “pop” lie much more complex dimensions. “Pop” accentuates the spectacularly performative aspect of today’s pop music, in which K-pop finds no rivals: personality of idols; picturesqueness of dance, makeup, fashion, and music videos; but most importantly, a highly dedicated populace – fans – generating and
sustaining the heat. These various facades again hark back to the rooted condescension toward frivolous music that is enjoying temporary success, but they also explain the unique strength of pop music in the age of rapid digital transformation, where viral media exercise unprecedented power – so much so that they have the clout to topple the aforementioned music hierarchy.

The rapid leap forward into digital consumption truly has transformed the face of the global music industry. From sound mixing to music promotion, the way music interfaces with fans and critics alike has changed foundationally. Especially with the rise of music and video streaming platforms such as Spotify and YouTube, the amorphous concept of popularity has turned into easily quantifiable streaming and viewing counts. One could dismiss this transformation as a frivolous popularity contest, but like it or not, it is here, asking us to map the contours of the pop music industry in a fundamentally different way. K-pop’s rise to global prominence merged precisely with this digital transformation; even more, K-pop was pioneering the process as the vanguard to showcase how digital platforms should catch up with the chimerically diversifying modes of expression. Digital platforms in the current ecosystem of the music industry are no longer just an arena to showcase popular music but a major stimulant expediting changes in the ways music is produced and consumed.

But to place our fingers only on the pulse of today is to miss out on the extensive genealogy of K-pop. To be sure, K-pop has many decades of history under its belt, and the genre’s resilience is due in large part to its evolving survival strategy cultivated and refined through generations. The history of K-pop can be traced alongside Korea’s national history at the turn of the millennium that influenced the nation’s cultural industry and the broader development of the global popular music industry, with important considerations of the way music has been produced and consumed, locally and globally. To begin, how did Korea with a small-scale music industry come to create a vibrant pop culture scene that would enthrall not only generations of young Asian consumers but also global audiences from diverse racial and generational backgrounds? Who are the main players in the K-pop ecosystem? From idol training to fan engagement, from studio recording to mastering choreographic sequences, what are the steps that go into the actual production and promotion of K-pop? And how can we account for K-pop’s global presence within the rapidly changing media environment and consumerist culture in the new millennium?

This book serves as an informed guide for finding answers to these questions by casting a double look at the synchronic and diachronic
development of the K-pop industry. It probes into multiple facets of K-pop as both a music industry and a transnational cultural scene while situating this performance genre in the historical context from late colonial Korea (1930-40) to today’s hyperdigitized world. It investigates the meteoric ascent of K-pop against the backdrop of increasing global connectivity, wherein a distinctive model of production and consumption is closely associated with creativity and futurity. Tracing these inquiries can be done meaningfully only when we closely consider the “technology paradigm,” which had a profound impact on the way music is produced and consumed. For example, the way we encounter K-pop has shifted not just along with the transition from vinyl records to CDs to mp3s but also along the trajectory of televisions to computers to cell phones. The technology paradigm extends the playing field of today’s K-pop from social media to the AI-driven metaverse, at times shifting the focus from music and performance to the limits of the tech industry itself.

While technological shifts have had a formative influence on the range of sound and visual production, what makes K-pop a truly unique cultural scene is its sticky human relationships – timeless networks that preceded the rise of technological wonders. A colossal energy builds among a dedicated fan community around their shared love for individual idols, bands, and social causes, but what also matters is the affective exchange between individual idols, between music artists from various generations, and among the adjacent labor force (production staff, volunteer translators in online fan communities). At the same time, the sweat-and tear-stained training process of each idol implies much human labor and sacrifice, often rendered invisible under blinding limelight.

For the most part, the analysis in this volume concerns idol-centered pop music that has emerged since the 1990s, primarily featuring young performers for multimedia entertainment catering to the younger generation of fans and consumers. While the majority of the chapters work around this specific definition of K-pop, much broader forces in the Korean music world have nourished, contextualized, and influenced the idol music industry. Rock and jazz musicians, balladeers, and folk singers of the 1970s and ’80s make occasional appearances to help us envision the ins and outs of the idol music and entertainment of today.

Following these multiple threads of investigation, this book interweaves the historical, technological, and affective registers of K-pop by mapping first its genealogy and production models, then the ways K-pop travels in multiple directions across global networks woven by transmedia platforms and multiracial fan communities. It is organized first to impart an overarching understanding of K-pop as both an industry and a network of cultural practices, then to move on to the backstage reality of the industry,
ending with how K-pop is globally circulated. Individual chapters in each part collaborate to produce a cohesive vision of the industry, artistry, and human entanglements.

Part I, “Genealogies,” provides a broad contextualization of K-pop, from its roots in 1930s–1940s Korean popular music under Japanese colonial rule to South Korea’s burgeoning record industry of the 1980s and ’90s. This broad scope is balanced by the close-up exposition of K-pop’s musical traits to showcase an array of industry structures, which sheds light on its unique soundscape, role division, and transnational network of talents. Roald Maliangkay’s “Sticking It to the Man: Early Neoliberalism in Korean Pop Music” illustrates the deployment of the talent system in Korean music industry during the late colonial era. This chapter discusses case studies that predate the K-pop idol system by half a century, foreshadowing how talents are discovered and promoted in an increasingly commercializing music world. The chapter analogizes how the record companies of the 1930s–1940s worked as the precedents of today’s entertainment conglomerates. Hyunjoon Shin’s “Itaewon Class, Gangnam Style, and Yeouido Star: The Industrial Revolution of Korean Pop in the 1990s” brings the genealogy of K-pop closer to the immediate past — to the nascent moment of the present-day K-pop industry. By focusing on the transforming structures of entertainment companies and talents who moved around various networks in the music and dance scene, Shin provides a comprehensive view of how the Korean music industry evolved before the millennium — in conjunction with the changing sociopolitical environment — and created the conditions for the present-day K-pop to emerge on the global stage.

Part II, “Sounding Out K-Pop,” delves into the technicalities of the K-pop soundscape. The two complementary chapters give us a tour of the ins and outs of sound production and analysis. Jung-Min Mina Lee’s “Finding the K in K-Pop Musically: A Stylistic History” presents a structuralist analysis of how sound, rhythm, and cadence constructed K-pop’s unique sonic registers. The chapter reveals the stylistic versatility of K-pop seen through a valuable insight of a musicologist who closely listens and reads iconic K-pop songs from various eras. Hye Won Kim’s “Recording the Soundscape of K-Pop” treats us to a rare backstage view on how the recording process is crucial for paving a rich aural palette for diverse acoustic expressions of the K-pop world. Rich in its empirical evidence, the chapter illustrates the evolution of the soundscape of K-pop as the recording technology has evolved, the working relationship between a songwriter and performer, and the distinctive concepts of the temporal and spatial nature of sound.

Part III, “Dancing to K-Pop,” takes a similar structure as Part II, first offering a dance practitioner’s structuralist reading of various typologies of
K-pop choreography, which is followed by how they are practiced by various cover dance groups. The two chapters posit gender expression as a critical focus of analysis, which leads to contradicting effects of K-pop movements – sometimes liberating but at other times reaffirming the constricting gender norms. Chuyun Oh’s “K-Pop Dance Music Video Choreography” walks readers through various techniques of K-pop movement and video production, highlighting the diversity of bodily movements that go into the making of K-pop visual effects. The choreographic typologies as presented by Oh mostly observe binary gender expressions, leading her to identify various shades of femininity and masculinity in motion. CedarBough Saeiji’s “Embodying K-Pop Hits through Cover Dance Practices” unpacks the fan-driven cover dance practices that create affective communities whereby Korea becomes a global cultural hub that can bypass the dominance of American popular culture. This ethnographic chapter provides an insight into how the line between passive viewing and active practicing of K-pop dance is easily blurred, showing that the major fuel of K-pop fandom is creative movements that emerge out of communal choreographic practices.

Part IV, “The Making of Idols,” highlights the Korean idol production system and its transnational adaptation. The two chapters in this part excavate the emotive aspect of the K-pop world, including idols’ intimate labor and kinetic storytelling that are maximally commodified for profitability. They also ask foundational questions about who gets to do K-pop by presenting a case of idol production by nonethnic Koreans outside Korea. Stephanie Choi’s “K-Pop Idols: Media Commodities, Affective Laborers, and Cultural Capitalists” sheds light on the realities of the idols’ and trainees’ working conditions. By carefully engaging with the human toll the process has on young aspiring entertainers, Choi exposes what is often left out in the blinding success stories of top performers. Giving fairhanded treatment to both the K-pop industry and the Western pop music world in her critique of entertainers’ lack of agency, Choi ultimately projects the K-pop world as a “critical site in which diverse social relations are created, subverted, and negotiated.” So-Rim Lee’s “From K-Pop to Z-Pop: The Pan-Asian Production, Consumption, and Circulation of Idols” warns about techno/ethnocentric nationalism and minor-scale imperialism against less developed nations within ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), which often have been the first landing points of global K-pop bands. Now that some ASEAN nationals are forming their version of pop, the chapter investigates how “the South Korean corporatized monopoly of K-pop” may sustain itself in the age of deeper multinational entanglements of talent, capital, and fan communities.
Part V, “The Band That Surprised the World,” fully confronts the discursive routes of K-pop’s global circulation, with a particular focus on the group BTS as the K-pop phenomenon of the new millennium. Kyung Hyun Kim’s “BTS, Transmedia, and Hip Hop” presents a polemical appraisal of how hip hop and rap music have been embraced as a major tenet of K-pop. By examining BTS’s early career, Kim provides a critical assessment of how the group’s phenomenal success in large part owes to their engagement with hip hop and rap music.

Kim argues that the sense of “home” and “locality,” so central to the US hip hop tradition, lacks an authentic counterpart in the works of BTS. Instead, BTS and its fans found an alternative home and belonging in cyberspace, especially with the launching of Bangtan Universe. Suk-Young Kim and Youngdae Kim’s “The BTS Phenomenon” presents an alternate view on authenticity by exploring how BTS’s self-written lyrics, not shying away from the dialects of their hometowns, exude locality. The chapter suggests that the notion of authenticity itself might be a fraught convention articulated by a Western hegemony that constantly marginalizes newcomers to the established music scene. The chapter shows that BTS’s global aspirations present a compelling alternative to the US-driven pop music industry by analyzing the band’s viral storytelling technique, the significance of BTS’s winning major music awards, and the band’s presence on social media platforms. Candace Epps-Robertson’s “Transcultural Fandom: BTS and ARMY” provides a smooth segue into Part VI with a brief panoramic view of K-pop fandom conventions. Presenting the BTS fan community of ARMY as a case in point, the chapter highlights their activities, which go beyond supporting BTS: social and political activism and mutual support of ARMY members’ career needs. Epps-Robertson’s chapter shows why K-pop is much more than music and media products for consumption; it is also a rallying point for millennials and those of Generation Z who value participatory culture.

Part VI, “Circuits of K-Pop Flow,” traces the discursive routes of K-pop’s circulation and consumption, with particular focus on new media’s role, fans’ translation of K-pop content, fan fiction, and K-pop tourism akin to pilgrimage. Michelle Cho’s “K-Pop and the Participatory Condition: Vicarity, Serial Affect, and ‘Real-Life Contents’” is a theoretical reflection on the transforming modes of media consumption as they redefine the shape of liveness in today’s media ecosystem. By positing K-pop as one of the most conspicuous global media movements today, the chapter illustrates how K-pop had been forecasting the significance of contagion and virality all along before they became the key to success. Thomas Baudinette’s “Idol Shipping Culture: Exploring Queer Sexuality among Fans of K-Pop” presents multiple ways idols as floating symbols of
desire can unexpectedly galvanize queer reception and re-creation of the original K-pop content. By closing in on the parallels between the Japanese and the Korean shipping culture (a particular kind of fan culture where fans project an imagined relationship between two idols), Baudinette’s work confirms the well-known thesis that culture is identified with the place of its circulation rather than with the place of its origin. Youjeong Oh’s “Following the Footsteps of BTS: The Global Rise of K-Pop Tourism” illuminates how K-pop aficionados often transform ordinary places into extraordinary sites to visit. The chapter illustrates how the narratives emerging from K-pop storytelling – whether from promotional images for albums, from music videos, or from idols’ Instagram photos – are able to authenticate any location, effectively elevating it into the holy land of K-pop pilgrimage.

With the mainstream success of Korean popular culture in recent years (think Parasite, Squid Game, BTS, and BLACKPINK), many still wonder how it all happened. Why Korea? Why now? Circling back to the beginning of this introduction will provide some insight: a high saturation of talented entertainers and fierce competition among them, a highly supportive but also critical fan base who constantly raise the bar for performers, the resilient hybridity of music styles, and Korea’s rapid embrace of digital transformation, which enabled Korean content to reach a worldwide audience. These are just a few highlights, and the full answers will be found in the pages of this book.

Notes
2 I thank Ian Condry for having first suggested this idea.


1 Sticking It to the Man

Early Neoliberalism in Korean Pop Music

ROALD MALIANGKAY

Open Competition

In cultural studies, as well as in many other disciplines, the use of the term “neoliberalism” has become increasingly prevalent. Outside the field of economics, to which it was once tied more closely, it has become a blanket term for capitalist measures that include deregulation, reductions in public expenditures, and an emphasis on individual entrepreneurship, competition, and free trade. Terry Flew notes that when interpreted as an approach to economic policy, it may be endorsed by left-leaning policy makers due to its inherent goal to reduce the cost of bureaucracy, but it is more frequently associated with ruthless approaches to capitalist gain.1 Nick Couldry argues that neoliberal strategies pose a danger when they promote a worldview that regards markets as the ideal sociopolitical form of organization and allows its principles to drown out alternative criteria. While neoliberalism may, for example, appear to foreground the voices of individuals, including those of fan communities, he warns that “the notion of freedom underlying neoliberalism is abstracted from any understanding of the social processes that underpin ‘voice’ in its full sense as an embodied process of effective speech.”2 In the workplace, the corporate identity does indeed risk obfuscating truly individual, personal experience and value, and while one might posit that the self-branding so common in popular culture is a triumph of individual expression, Couldry contends that it merely represents the “opportunity to compete as a commodity.”3 Since neoliberal values have become internalized and very much part of our culture, championing a more introspective and less performative account of the non-market-driven needs and emotions of individuals may prove quite challenging.

The business of Korean popular music is driven by neoliberalism in a range of different ways. According to Inkyu Kang, it is responsible for the hypercommodification and hyperrationalization of K-pop, as evidenced by the creation of “talents” through years of training, the wide range of spin-off products, and the frequent use of lip-synching. And it explains, he argues, the deindividualization of group members and their replaceability within idol formations.4 But neoliberalism can be identified in another equally important aspect of K-pop, namely the semantics of K-pop.
performances. In conformist and (from a Korean point of view) politically correct fashion, \(^5\) many idol formations passionately endorse the voices of their fans through messages of individuality, girl power, and self-love. The phenomenon of Seo Taiji and Boys demonstrated, \(^6\) however, that emphasis on personal empowerment and symbols of nonconformity can be used to promote major brands, including idol formations, luring fans into portraying themselves as critical consumers who happen to have developed a “bias.” There is one other realm where the connection between neoliberalism and today’s K-pop industry is predominant. It is where competition and public scrutiny allow individuals a chance to break out as rising stars through the reality talent show.

Over the past decade, reality talent shows have experienced a dramatic surge in popularity on South Korean TV networks. Examples include Mnet’s Superstar K (2009–2016), The Voice of Korea (2012–2013), I Can See Your Voice (Neo-ui mokori-ga boyeo, since 2017), and Produce 101 (2016–2019); tvN’s Korea’s Got Talent (2011–2012); SBS’s Survival Audition K-Pop Star (2011–2017); KBS’s Top Band (2011–2015) and Singing Battle (Norae ssaum, 2016–2017); and MBC’s Star Audition: The Great Birth (Seuta odisyeon widaehan tansaeng, 2010–2013) and I Am a Singer (Na-neun gasuda, 2011–2015). Even Marvel’s comic book character Luna Snow, the K-pop idol turned superhero, was introduced in 2019 as a member of 4LIT, “winners of the idol origins contest.” \(^7\) Reality talent shows revolve around a small panel of noted individuals judging music performances by amateurs over the course of competitive elimination rounds. As they play into the general public’s distrust of the music industry’s manipulative power and gatekeeping, viewers are asked to cast their vote, either live or online. Meanwhile, the amateur status of contestants and the name of a show like The Voice of Korea fuel the sentiment that audiences are playing a role in curating true talent.

Hyeonu Han argues that the talent shows are more competitions than auditions. He believes an audition is a way of seeing how well you fit a particular role, while a competition focuses on how well a predetermined song is played: “The main concern is who sings the designated song better and who goes up to the higher pitch.” \(^8\) But although the element of competition is undeniable and will also play out among the fans, the shows equally encourage the audience to assess whether a candidate is “fit” to win. As important as their voices, backstories serve as evidence of contestants’ authenticity. Critics note that viewers are made to judge a limited range of renditions of well-established styles of music based on vague criteria. \(^9\) Indeed, for the television shows to be successful, and for the successful contestants to earn the lucrative rewards that will allow them to commit themselves fully to their artistic ambitions, the undefined criteria for
performance cannot completely shun stylistic conventions or be perceived as superimposed; the contestants must emulate existing conventions to win the maximum number of votes. The business of popular entertainment favors those with the greatest commercial promise, and despite the outcome arguably being predetermined, by seemingly defying the cultural hegemony the notion of raw talent promotes sales. As Jeremy Gilbert notes, the idea of the “innate talent” of individuals serves to “justify the obviously self-perpetuating nature of inegalitarian institutions and social relations.”

Adorno’s idea of pseudo-individualism therefore applies to both the business model and the supposed talent of the contestants. The considerable commercial importance of the shows – some have generated viewer ratings as high as 20 percent – can cast doubts upon the validity of the polls. After all, judges and producers may have a vested interest in selecting contestants who, for better or worse, appeal to a large percentage of the population. When in spite of the format’s popularity and reliance on viewer voting, Mnet’s producers feared that the 2019 installment of their Produce series would produce an unfavorable outcome, they rigged the voting process.

John Fiske defines fandom as a minority’s act of appropriating “certain performers, narratives or genres” from mainstream pop. “It is,” he finds, “typically associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race.” The definition is helpful because it identifies the crucial factor of empowerment, which may take different forms and could be taken to comprise cultural, social, and economic involvement or recognition. Although K-pop and talent shows have come under increasing scrutiny by fans, the criticism does not immediately pose a challenge to the business model per se. Critics may genuinely oppose aspects of the industry’s hegemony and have a significant effect on sales but may ultimately be driven by a desire to find unity in a common purpose, promote their fandom and ability to scrutinize, or compete with fans of other idols. Since fandom presents an avenue for young people to distinguish themselves, even strong criticism of talent shows may be geared less toward generating systemic change than toward generating likes. Pop culture fandom is aspirational; it yields greater agency to the subordinated, even though the majority of critically engaged fans may not seek control over particular media to reverse their subordination, however loud their voices.

Selling Records

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, record companies’ primary source of revenue was the sale of physical copies. The wonders
of new media technologies and the foreign scenes and sounds they pro-
duced certainly drew in affluent consumers, but as soon as prices began to
drop and the size of the middle class began to grow, the business became a
dominant feature of daily life. In Korea, too, talent shows, radio broadcasts,
and countless advertisements promoting the latest records could be found
everywhere. While the elements of cost, sound quality, and uniqueness
remained considerable selling points for some time, the growing phenom-
енon of celebrity stardom eventually turned fandom into a fourth major
factor driving sales. Enjoying the accolades of connoisseurship and cosmo-
politanism that their involvement awarded, many young urbanites kept up
to date on the activities of their idols and emulated their style. They bought
magazines and frequented record shops and popular music venues to
follow the latest developments and share experiences and opinions.

Having steadily grown an interest in Korean talent among Korean and
Japanese middle-class consumers, in the late 1920s the companies began to
increasingly bring out modern, faster arrangements of traditional songs
called “new folk songs” (sin minyo) and yuhaengga (yuhaeng, popular; ga,
song). Because they followed Japan’s pentatonic yonanuki scale, they could
become popular with both Koreans and Japanese domestically, opening up
the possibility of a Japanese-language release. Even so, in 1928, F. H.
Goldsmith, a recording engineer for Victor Japan, said that across north-
east Asia people were primarily interested in their own music, with native
pop genres generally holding little commercial promise overseas.14 Jazz
was the last of the three primary pop song styles to emerge and thrive.
Unlike the other two styles, which could be described as melancholic,
 jazz songs were mostly upbeat. Because many of them corresponded
with passionate dance sequences admired on the silver screen, they felt
decidedly more modern and, on account of their more playful character,
may have symbolized conformity to the political status quo. Indeed,
Yongwoo Lee finds that in Korea’s context, young people turned jazz
music into a commodity that tied them to America’s utopic contempor-
anity.15 Rather than merely emulating aspects of Western culture,
however, Koreans sought to own it. To a Westerner, Korean jazz may
have seemed flattering, but to Koreans it was defiantly progressive; its
very existence denied foreign patency and allowed it to be embedded
with Korean sensibilities. Despite having no control over any particular
medium or genre, Koreans were able to create “glocalized” forms of
entertainment that highlighted their own potential and expressed
uniquely Korean sentiments. But while Korean successes overseas were
important for their self-image, Korean jazz did not sell abroad and was
not even popular with Korea’s own elite, who preferred Western classical
music.16