

Not Your Fandom, Not Your Problem?

Cosmopolitan Solidarities And Fissures Among Transnational K-pop Fans

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Academic Year 2020/21

Final Project of the MA in International Studies on Media, Power, and Difference

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine online negotiations of transnational fan identities through the K-pop boy group Neo Culture Technology or NCT. Many studies have focused on how transnational fandoms can foster intercultural understanding among fans, but few have sought to understand the ways that pop culture products can re-inscribe racial and ethnic identities. This study explores how this re-inscription happens on Twitter, as the social media site helps form digital fan communities and enable their relationships with pop culture texts and each other. Through an intertextual analysis of public tweets containing the hashtags #boycott_resonance, #boycott_resonance, and #NCTApologize, I unpack how the issue within the fandom facilitates performances of cosmopolitan identities. I argue that transnational fans perform and instrumentalize cosmopolitan solidarities and cosmopolitan fissures for both fannish and political ends through consumerist expectation, authentic marginalization, and fannish territorialization. By extension, they collectively construct a cosmopolitan identity and ethics unique to fandom.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism, transnational fandom, K-pop, fan studies, fan cosmopolitanism

Type of project: Journal Article (*Communication, Culture, and Critique*)

Communication, Culture, Critique details

- <https://academic.oup.com/ccc>
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CCC seeks to understand and interrogate the changing mediascape and its place in global societies. However, we are less interested in the rhetorical analysis of singular texts or the properties of any particular medium than we are in the complex role of media culture in wider historical, economic, cultural, and political dynamics. At the same time, digital media convergence and emerging practices (such as the rise of #blacklivesmatter and other forms of hashtag activism) present a crucial context for scholars to evaluate and historicize the present moment. Such developments often require us to re-evaluate and retheorize media as objects and agents of political change, and *CCC* welcomes innovative scholarship and commentary in this vein.

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- Curran, N.M. (2021). Neoliberalism From Above and Cosmopolitanism From Below: A Korean-English Meetup Group in the United States. *Communication, Culture and Critique* 14(1), 70–88. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcaa020>.
- I believe *Communication, Culture, and Critique* is an excellent journal for my objectives in the following paper, as both the journal and this research project are concerned with shifting dynamics in globalization and media cultures. CCC seeks studies on “globalization and transnationalism” and how “power, inequality, and justice” are implicated in their complexifying dynamics. In this project, I am concerned precisely with these, specifically how such relations happen in the context of a Korean pop fandom. In the following pages, I interrogate how K-pop fandom can both be a space for transnational understanding and *mis*understanding. I also emphasize the situatedness of these tensions on social media and fan spaces, as paying attention to these foregrounds the distinct nature of the dynamics that I look at. I take on these with cosmopolitanism and cultural studies as my primary theoretical approaches— approaches that have also been used by related studies published on CCC.
- Additional details
 - CCC word limit: 7,000 words with References (not including Abstract and Keywords)
 - Word count of this project: 6,998
 - CCC citation format: APA

INTRODUCTION

In October 2020, Korean pop (hereafter K-pop) boy group NCT – Neo Culture Technology – released “Make A Wish.” With the months-long period of promotions for a highly anticipated comeback came fan debates about perceived cultural appropriation, as visually, the track had ambiguous elements of Islamic imagery. In subsequent stage performances, fans noticed the use of images of a sacred site in Iraq, with accompanying religious text, as well as adlib hand gestures in the choreography supposedly from Indian classical dance (Herman, 2020). This perceived mix of various, even disjointed, elements is a display of the genre’s hybridity and has become central to studying the K-pop wave (McLaren & Jin, 2020; Ono & Kwon, 2013). For one, the hybridity is seen as a strategy for its transnational thrust, K-pop ultimately being a commercial product of a highly disciplined industry supported by neoliberal state policies to constitute Korean soft power (G. Kim, 2019). Too, it is seen as a testament to the decentering of cultural globalization from the West and the interrogation of global center-periphery dynamics (Appadurai, 1996; Lee, 2018).

In this article, I explore how transnational fans on Twitter engaged with this shifting global cultural dynamic. K-pop fans are physically dispersed along this center-periphery divide and thus live its attendant tensions. Physical dispersal also means that interactions mostly happen online, the social media website Twitter being among the most used. K-pop then becomes one site where tensions that come with cultural difference and physical distance play out as K-pop fans tend to have ethical expectations of the media they consume (Couldry, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Yoon, 2018). It reveals the potential for K-pop, as well as other border-crossing pop media, to be a site of negotiations over transnational identities and struggles among fans. These negotiations are also implicit performances of particular cosmopolitan identities, a process made complex by

being set against an industry and digital fan culture embedded in complex global economic and cultural flows. In what ways do these cosmopolitan identities manifest in a K-pop fandom?

COSMOPOLITANISM/S

Cosmopolitanism can be a complex subject in large part due to its application and development across multiple fields in the social sciences. Classically, it has been widely understood and deployed in the Greek and Kantian sense, the former establishing its fundamental ‘citizen of the world’ backbone and the latter lending it a moral impetus. Though perhaps too simplistic now in relation to multidirectional flows of global capital, these definitions are still useful in illuminating the concept’s most basic idea and its fundamental limitations. Both traditions espoused the primacy of reason in their vision of a global cosmopolis and clearly arose from a Western, Eurocentric subject position seeking to impose universality rather than what Walter Mignolo (2011) calls “diversality,” or the push for diversity itself as the universal ideal.

Indeed the orientation towards diversity or difference has become the more instructive frame in contemporary scholarship on the concept, particularly in cultural and media studies (Appadurai, 2011; Kurasawa, 2004). Even the concept of elite cosmopolitanism captures this bent towards difference. Elite cosmopolitanism, heavily contested by many critical and postcolonial scholars, values the accrual of difference as cultural capital (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004; Hannerz, 2008). It is best encapsulated by the figure of the jetsetter, able to jump from one country to another less out of necessity and more out of desire and easy access. Usually, it is the figure of the white American, Brit, or European afforded the title cosmopolitan (Curran, 2020; Werbner, 2007). Arjun Appadurai (2011) challenges this strict association with elitism and conceptualized “cosmopolitanism from below,” where worldliness flows not from formal

markers like education but instead from experience and intercultural interaction. Thus what we have is not a single cosmopolitanism but cosmopolitanisms in the plural, to signal the concept's multivalence.

While the contrast between the abovementioned cosmopolitanisms importantly brings to light the question of unequal power dynamics, it does seem to treat cosmopolitanism as fixed, contingent upon identity markers like race and class. Instead, Jonathan Ong (2009) considers cosmopolitanism itself as an identity, developed “in particular contexts and [expressed] in different ways to suit particular purposes” (p. 454). This does not mean that race, class, and gender are unimportant. Rather Ong's typology suggests that these shape all performances of cosmopolitan identity in different ways. Ong maps out four kinds of cosmopolitan identity in what he calls the “cosmopolitan continuum” (p. 454): closed cosmopolitanism (as in closed, diasporic communities), instrumental cosmopolitanism (as in elite cosmopolitanism), banal cosmopolitanism (as in the everyday), and ecstatic cosmopolitanism (as in compassion for the distant Other), with the final type being the most explicitly normative (Appiah, 2006; Chouliaraki, 2013; Silverstone, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999; Werbner, 1999).

These formulations are further complicated by globalization and the acceleration of digital technologies, affecting our ideas and experiences of distance and difference, so much so that “virtual cosmopolitanism” has also emerged in the literature. Miriam Sobré-Denton (2015) describes it best as “cosmopolitanism... facilitated by mediated social spaces, in which *cultural and social capital* may be *transmitted* through social media networks, allowing for a greater transnational spread of ideas than corporeal cosmopolitanism” (p. 2, emphasis added). Important too is technology's ability to facilitate social justice, mainly through the “language of consciousness” or the act of informing in a virtual space those who would otherwise be

physically scattered and unreachable (Kyriakidou, 2008; Sorrells, 2013). I latch onto Ong's assertion that these multiple cosmopolitanisms, including the virtual, are identities shaped by context and are performed to suit particular needs. I specifically try to understand how this thesis operates within a transnational fandom space where fans are dispersed, originating from various contexts, and united only digitally. If Ong argues that cosmopolitan identity is contextual, then online fandom is one context in which it is performed.

GLOBAL K-POP, GLOBAL FANDOM

K-pop is an industry that testifies to renewed global cultural dynamics, as it simultaneously challenges Western, Anglocentric, media hegemony while also replicating not just its styles but its neoliberal industry logics. K-pop is widely described as a hybridized music genre, frequently using English words in songs, employing multi-cultural references in videos, assembling multi-national artists in music production, and generating a global fanbase (C. Oh, 2014; I. Oh, 2013). Analyzing English in K-pop songs, Dal Yong Jin and Woongjae Ryoo (2014) contend that the genre's hybridity is only in terms of form and style, failing to create a space devoid of American influence. In K-pop specifically, though, it is never just the musical elements that attract fans, but a mix of music, visuals, fandom, and parasocial relationships with artists (Jung, 2011; Swan, 2018).

Critiques have been leveled at studying fans of media generated by such a hyper-capitalistic industry like K-pop. Gooyoung Kim (2019) underscores the role of neoliberalism not just in the production and distribution of K-pop but in the formation and regulation of fans' consumption. Kim notes that "to focus on fans tends to celebrate those who are mesmerized by K-pop, and in turn, *likely to legitimate the industry's business or marketing strategy* that aims to

create audiences' identification and participation in cultural commodities" (p. xix, emphasis added). I contend that analyzing fans, however, still has critical value. This is not to overlook the "fundamental asymmetrical relationship" between the industry and the fans (p. xix), but rather an attempt to look precisely at how other asymmetries could develop within fan spaces.

Studies not just on K-pop and other Korean media products but also of border-crossing media from outside the West have largely had celebratory readings of fans' relationships with cultural products (Hills, 2017; Iwabuchi, 2002). The question of familiarity and distance animates the literature, with studies looking into the genre and industry's hybridity to explain what attracts fans. Hallyu scholars have increasingly been interested in such questions too, though most studies focus on practices of non-Korean Asian fans who arguably have less of a cultural distance to overcome (Capistrano 2019; Jang & Song 2015). Studies on fans from the West, meanwhile, have overwhelmingly focused on immigrants of Asian descent, seemingly adhering to the hypothesis of familiarity or proximity in their analysis. But positively, it is expanding to include perspectives of fans with stark linguistic and cultural differences, like those from Latin America and Europe (Choi & Park 2014).

I invoke another kind of cosmopolitanism specifically conceptualized with fandom in mind—pop cosmopolitanism. Pop cosmopolitanism describes how "transcultural flows of popular culture inspire new forms of global consciousness and cultural competency" and is a way for consumers of these popular products to "escape...the parochialism of their local [communities]" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 152). In a way, it is adjacent to instrumental and elite cosmopolitanism with its propensity for cultural capital. Yet it differs in that it has no privilege of mobility, for the most part, and is not afforded official markers of cultural expertise. Nationality-based identities is one prevalent interpretive frame used by fans to bridge this

cultural gap. Bertha Chin and Lori Hitchcock Morimoto (2013) have critiqued this for being insufficient in understanding the appeal of border-crossing media. While it is true that affinity despite origin is possible and largely shape fan experiences, I am interested in how nationality-based identities and tensions are reinscribed when particular media contents similarly invoke them. How do fans negotiate this integration of foreign and local and everything in between, be they tasteful representations or otherwise, based on their own distanced subject positions?

Central to these studies on international K-pop fans is digital convergence through social media. Not only are online platforms used by companies for official promotions, they are also sites where fans construct relationships with music, artists, and fellow fans (McLaren and Jin, 2020; Ono & Kwon, 2013). More recently, journalistic and scholarly work have analyzed fans' potential for online activism and have pointed to how social media can both help fans overcome but also, ironically, accelerate asymmetries among their experiences (Bruner, 2020; Madden, 2020). In K-pop fandom, social media is not just a medium but becomes an entire "community of practice." Zunera Malik and Sham Haidar (2020) provide an important picture of how K-pop fans are organized, particularly on Twitter, noting that K-pop fandom on the website constitutes "a platform where [fans] are actively collaborating and coordinating their efforts towards a goal...and learning from each other" (p. 16). They refer to this community of practice as stan twitter, distinguishing them from casual fans because of their deeper investment in K-pop. Malik and Haidar also look at the hierarchies that result from these interactions, particularly the one contingent upon one's follower count. They ultimately argue that though hierarchies exist, fan interactions on Twitter still develop democratic attitudes, and that positions of power are "largely unstable" because online communities are "fluid" (p. 16).

This leaves room for exploring more deeply the specifics of these positions of power. K-pop fandom can encompass issues not strictly tied to K-pop media, contrary to the rather outdated perception of fans as blindly obsessed with or addicted to the media they consume (de Kloet and van Zoonen, 2007). For instance, Angela Gracia Cruz et al. (2019) find a re-inscription of cross-border differences in their analysis of English fan-made paratexts on various online K-pop forums. They note that there is clear tension between international and Korean K-pop fans who not only consume content but have also often engaged in conversations around cultural appropriation in relation to K-pop's hybridity. They also interestingly situate global fans – including those from the proverbial West – in the periphery, given that they have fewer interpretive frames than Korean fans due to linguistic and cultural differences. Often through translation work by fellow fans in the form of fan forums and blogs, they are able to “contextualize the multi-layered meanings of K-pop in relation to their own complex global and local cultural identity dynamics” (p. 14). Such online interactions where some seem to be more active and influential than others also “constitute a significant site for the negotiation of national, pan-ethnic, and regional identities” (p. 12). If Western and foreign fans, for instance, are unable to understand references to Korean language and culture as holistically as those immersed and conversant in this said culture, how do they negotiate power or make sense of their marginal position in terms of other factors?

FRAMEWORK AND METHOD: K-POP COSMOPOLITAN IDENTITIES

To understand how these negotiations of transnational fan identities happen on Twitter, I employ the concept of cosmopolitan identity as proposed by Ong (2009). With its conceptual multiplicity and operability as an identity, it is useful in understanding K-pop fandom, whose

fans are physically separated across borders, with different contexts and ways of understanding what is deemed foreign content. As Ong concisely puts it, “cosmopolitanism is a contextual, fragile identity” shaped by multiple tensions from the local and global, the universal and the particular, the near and the far, among others (p. 463). More than this, they are also influenced by the fact that their relations are mostly constituted online, so tensions are located in both physical and digital contexts. In K-pop, we find fans imbricated within these tensions as they engage with border-crossing media with other fans who are also, at least physically, beyond their borders.

Important in the analysis is attention to how globalization and cosmopolitanism, though tied to broader hegemonic structures, are actually sites of tension between “cultural homogenization and heterogenization” and of contradictory desires for both Westernized and non-Westernized ways of life (Appadurai 1996, p. 29). Audiences are not just beholden to bigger societal forces but are rather capable of adopting and resisting their meanings. I am interested in understanding how these are replicated in the multicultural space of K-pop fandom, where fans interact bearing these global asymmetries.

Particularly, I explore how these are negotiated through the K-pop boy group NCT or Neo Culture Technology. As mentioned earlier, the group made a comeback in October 2020 that drew critique for perceived cultural appropriation. This led fans to call for a boycott of the group’s future works, particularly the one scheduled for the following month of November. I find this group particularly relevant to this discussion for two primary reasons. First, the music video around which the controversy arose clearly exemplifies K-pop’s surface-level hybridity (Jin & Ryoo, 2014), not only integrating English words in the lyrics but borrowing from Bollywood imagery in the video as well. Second is the fact that the group is explicitly shaped by the thrust to globalize— it is its company’s cosmopolitan project. From the conception of the group, its

company's head envisioned an "age of *borderless culture* [that] creates a *virtual nation* [inviting] citizens of all nations to Korea" (Soo-man in S. Kim, 2020, p. 26, emphasis added). Immediately, it invokes the main factors that constitute cultural globalization and easily invites scrutiny in matters of cultural sensitivity, as analysis also partly revealed.

For this project, I collected Tweets using Twitter's public application programming interface (API). The tweets collected were from 2020, from October 12, the release date of NCT's "Make A Wish," until November 23, the release date of the single for which fans had called the boycott. These hashtags were used to collect tweets: #boycott_resonance, #boycott_resonace (a typographical error that trended), and #NCTApologize. A total of 1,251 tweets were collected, including retweets, some of which were repeats of original tweets.

To engage fan negotiations of cosmopolitan identities, I employed textual analysis, specifically intertextual analysis stipulated by Norman Fairclough (2003). It foregrounds the importance of both text and context that shape the objects of analysis, which in this paper are fan tweets. Fairclough argues that this technique "crucially mediates the connection between language and social context" (p. 195) and that it aids media reception studies by "answering questions...about what other domains of life media messages are linked to" (p.204). Similarly, existing analyses of K-pop fans that center on cross-border relations online have situated their interactions within and beyond textual limits (Chun, 2017; Swan, 2018). I follow this perspective, paying attention to what tweets say in the context of a specific fan community with global breadth. I thematically coded the tweets with concepts from cosmopolitanism and global fandom to aid my development of categories for discussion. Representative tweets from these themes were sampled and then interpreted based on which ones clearly invoked notions of intercultural understanding, territoriality, or national identity. They are close-read in the next

section in the cultural studies tradition to emphasize the power dynamics within and beyond the texts (Couldry, 2006).

Importantly, I do not claim positivist objectivity in these interpretations. As a fan, I am familiar with communicative behaviors in fan spaces and use this knowledge in my analysis of the social space of fandom. Moreover, my interpretations are implicitly informed by my subject position as a scholar from the Global South, which has historically been perceived as a marginal position in globalization dynamics.

RESULTS: COSMOPOLITAN FAN IDENTITIES THROUGH K-POP

CONSUMERIST EXPECTATION

One way that fans engaged with calls for boycott and circulating news that NCT had done cultural appropriation was through expressing disappointment as consumers, though crucially as foreign ones. This suggests that they acknowledge, at the very least, that K-pop is a commercial product being marketed to them in deliberate ways, and that there are transnational tensions at play in their position as consumers of a globalizing music genre. The tweets expressed the acknowledgement of this product-consumer relationship in different ways, ranging from hopeful to pragmatic to resigned as regards their influence and role as fans.

@SMTOWNandSTORE you want our money but you don't want to respect your international fans :/ #nctapologize #boycott_resonance

This tweet begins by mentioning @SMTOWNandSTORE, which is one of the official social media channels of SM Entertainment, the company that manages NCT. That the tweet is immediately using the Twitter function of a mention to get the attention of SM Town specifically shows that it is a direct address to the company, implying that culpability for the issue is placed

on them. The tweet also recognizes the transactional nature of intercultural respect when it talks about how the company only wants money “but” cannot respect international fans.

Linguistically, this means there is an expectation of respect in exchange for international fans’ money, and that the company has failed to do it.

how is sm supposed to have a global group when they don’t even take into consideration the feelings of international fans nd won’t address the issues at hand when they mess up
#nctapologize #boycott_resonance #sbs_apologize

Similarly, this tweet shows this disappointment, again attaching responsibility to the company (“sm”) for not taking the feelings of international fans into consideration. Here, though, we see some more elaboration on the source of discontent, beyond just the transactional expectation shown by the previous tweet. This one brings up the fact that NCT are a “global group,” recognizing that the group’s international thrust comes with certain expectations from “international fans.” NCT is known as global not just because of their “To the world” greeting or the vision of a “borderless culture” that defined its formation, but also because it has members not just from Korea but China, Taiwan, Japan, Thailand, the US, and Canada as well. They have members who themselves embody the same foreignness that fans experience and, as such, become one of the factors that influence fans’ affinities and expectations. Still, though, the responsibility here is pinned on the company, as if saying that their explicitly cosmopolitan project is only acceptable if done in a way that is considerate to international fans. Clear in both these previous tweets is the label of “international fan,” which brings to light the nationality-based identity politics that is present in K-pop fandom. In this kfans (Korean fan) versus ifans (international fan) divide, the latter are often situated in the periphery, as they theoretically have less cultural and linguistic access to K-pop, a Korean cultural product (Cruz et al, 2019). In a

way, this destabilizes the traditional West-periphery divide that puts a premium on the likes of the United States and Western Europe by treating Korea as the locus of power instead, at least where popular media is concerned. How, then, do international fans negotiate this peripheral position?

GUYS! Think about it, sm has never let nct apologize unless kfans are mad. Let's spread this to kfans and tell them what's going on and how its affecting international nctzens.

Getting the kfans on our side will make it easier to get a statement from sm ent.

#boycott_resonace

One way is pragmatically attempting solidarity with Korean fans. Here, there is a concession that a Korean company would only listen if Korean fans were mad and were to speak up. There is an acceptance here of the marginality of being a non-Korean fan, but an optimism too that intercultural understanding could help make for a more harmonious global fandom, one where ifans and kfans are on the same side (“on our side”), presumably against “sm [entertainment],” who are the ones that need to answer for content that might be disrespectful to non-Korean identities. On top of optimism, however, there is also a sense of duty on the part of international fans to “tell [Korean fans] what’s going on.” There is an assumption of international’s fans’ access to worldly knowledge vis-à-vis an assumed insular perspective of a Korean fan. The impetus for intercultural understanding, as initiated here by the international fan, is grounded in an assumption of worldly superiority, of knowledge beyond the borders of Korea and K-pop.

Rihanna apologised when she had that music played during the fashion walk.... what about NCT????? Where is NCT apology? #NCTApologize

If the previous tweet totalizes Korean fans in contrast to international fans, this next tweet totalizes popular media as a whole. In the above tweet, we see exasperation in the multiple question marks, coupled with the association with Western artist Rihanna to explain their outrage. The tweet here is referring to the use of a song that included sacred Muslim text in a fashion show of the artist's fashion label. Rihanna promptly apologized after online backlash, and this urgency became the above tweet's point of comparison. Like Rihanna, NCT appropriated Islamic text. But unlike Rihanna, the K-pop group did not apologize. An interesting thing about the tweet is the seemingly equal expectation leveled at a Western artist and a K-pop group when it comes to matters of accountability over cultural disrespect. The tweet expresses outrage as though both cases should have had the same relationship with what is perceived to be a peripheral culture. This totalizing tendency sees Western and non-Western popular media as equally influential and as ultimately just corporate exploits, bound more to the profit imperative than geography.

AUTHENTIC MARGINALIZATION

There were tensions revolving around identity among international fans as well, giving a picture of how diverse the blanket label of "international fan" can be, as it consists of not just fans from the so-called West but also fans whose identities are considered marginal even beyond the context of fandom. Because the boycott revolved around perceived disrespect of Islamic symbols and classical Indian dance later on, these were the identities brought up most in fan discussions. Heavily shaping the debate was the matter of voice or who gets to speak about the issue by virtue of an authentic experience as a peripheral subject (Chouliaraki, 2013).

#boycott_resonace please understand that this isn't a game. POC are hurt. Including me.

In this tweet, we see a simple declaration of hurt. It refers to the issue as not “a game,” as if cognizant of the usually playful nature of fandom, as well as the often futile attempts at political talk and action online (Pfister & Soliz, 2011). In this way, the issue is given gravitas as something serious, doubly signaling that fan spaces are otherwise engaged in trivial activities while also setting an earnest political debate in the same space. The peripheral identity is given more specificity here, too. Among international fans, it is specifically “POC” or people of color who are “hurt.” The “Including me” is significant, because it is meant to signal authority in the discussion as someone who is directly affected by the issue.

STOP SPEAKING OVER BLACK FANS AND SE ASIAN FANS WHO ARE UPSET!
 IF THEY WANT TO BOYCOTT OR UNSTAN, LET THEM! IT'S THEIR DECISION
 #boycott_resonance

This tweet similarly values the authentically marginalized voice, albeit in an angrier register. If the previous tweet is an expression of hurt, with a gentle request of “please,” this one, in all capital letters, is an angry imperative. Here, it is specifically “black fans” and “se (Southeast) asian” fans who are to be afforded the authority to speak, and their unhappiness over the issue, as well as the measures they take due to hurt feelings, must not be questioned (“...LET THEM! IT’S THEIR DECISION”). The identity of the “international fan” and “POC” here become even more specific, too, locating hurt and anger in Black fans and Southeast Asian fans. Interestingly, these are also broad labels, as there is no way of generalizing whether the issue at hand affected these communities directly, or if these expressions of frustration are meant as blanket statements about insensitivity towards marginalized voices by the K-pop industry and by fellow fans who “speak over” them. Nonetheless, it illuminates the fracture among international fans and how a globally oriented product like K-pop can crack these divisions open rather than

automatically facilitate cosmopolitan solidarity like the dream of a borderless culture optimistically envisions. We see more clearly a re-inscription of racial and ethnic identities, and how fans latch onto these identities to arbitrate who has the authority to speak and who has the right to feel authentic hurt. One's marginalized identity then becomes currency in public fan debate. There seems to be a recognition of its potency too, given that mere proximity to such identities also seems to be associated with authority, as in the following:

My REAL Indian moots on my secret (kind of) account does not (sic) find it offensive. So I can't understand why some of you here act like you're Indian and pretending to be offended. #boycott_resonance

The tweet markedly puts an emphasis on “REAL Indian moots” or mutuals, which is Twitter speak for people who follow each other and may have interacted on the website. This already sets up the tweet's charge later on that there are people “pretending to be offended,” “[acting] like [they're] Indian” to be seen as an authoritative voice in the debate. Ironically, this tweet does the same thing it accuses others of, that is, claiming proximity to marginalized identities, though it is important to note that due to the generally anonymous nature of K-pop stan Twitter, it is nearly impossible to ascertain whether the identities fans claim and perform are in fact true (Malik & Haidar, 2020).

In the global fanscape on Twitter, then, marginal identity and experiences are both boon and bane. They are generally accepted markers of authority, of whose voice holds more weight in debates surrounding K-pop as a globalizing industry and genre. At the same time, this accepted authority is prone to weaponization— it becomes a currency used to either invalidate authentic marginalized voices or, at the very least, muddy the landscape, such that authentic identity becomes impossible to verify to the point that it becomes insignificant altogether. In this

way, it then runs the risk of being no more than a fannish trifle, drowned out as just another issue in fandom that might eventually fizzle out and be forgotten.

FANNISH TERRITORIALIZATION

There were indeed fans who saw the issue as first and foremost, a problem within the fandom. Rather than identities along racial and ethnic lines, what they arbitrated was authentic fan identity, or what it means to be a real fan or fake fan. I include this in my analysis because in my view it shows, at the very least, an impulse to draw borders, or a propensity for Othering that significantly defines multicultural spaces, which is often seen as something that inhibits cosmopolitan solidarity (Ong, 2009). This tweet encapsulates this fannish territorialization:

This is NCT issue and Nctzens are holding them accountable for it. CAN YA'LL LEAVE US ALONE DAMN IT, we ain't even trying to invade your fandom we staying here with our #boycott_resonance until we hear an apology. Ignore us if ya'll find us annoying smh

Here, a fan defines the issue as an “NCT issue” that their fans (“NCTzens”) alone are dealing with. This, though, does not view the issue as senseless, as it professes an attempt within the fandom to “[hold] them accountable” for the charges of cultural appropriation. This next tweet makes this similar charge, succinctly encapsulating this stance as “NOT YOUR FANDOM, NOT YOUR PROBLEM.”

“#boycott_resonance and #NCTApologize are trending and most of the tweets are not from nctzens. NOT YOUR FANDOM, NOT YOUR PROBLEM”

This tweet critiques the use of the hashtags for so-called fan wars, or instances in which fans of one K-pop group hate on another K-pop group to muddy the latter’s public image. This is the behavior of so-called anti-fans, or antis in fandom speak, and is nothing new in the pop

culture fanscape, though it has become exacerbated within K-pop fandom due to the sheer density of fans, as well as their inherently digital nature (Alters, 2007). In the two tweets above, we see an implicit familiarity with such fan wars, and an anxiety that an avenue for otherwise sincere discussions about transnational identities would be hijacked for senseless, fannish causes. The drawing of borders around being an NCT fan, then, is seen as important to facilitate sincere discussions. Here, the cultural capital – the passport of sorts – for entry is being a fan, and this status in itself is one that is easily contested. The discussion is directed to a matter of fan identity first, broader identity politics second. It is not that fans are not allowed to discuss geopolitics and cultural appropriation— it is just that they have to be a fan of the group involved first before they express their own opinions on the issue. We see this more in the following tweet:

You all can just leave the fandom already you join antis in the bandwagon hate, don't pay attention even when something it's not really controversial and even fall for mistranslations. Just fucking leave #NCTAPOLOGIZE

Here, the call for boycott itself is seen as a controversy stirred by anti-fans and those who join them in the “bandwagon hate.” The tweet effectively closes the door for negotiations about cultural appropriation and peripheral experiences and identities within the NCT fandom, calling the whole ordeal “not really controversial” and closing the tweet with a hostile “just fucking leave.” Interestingly, it faults other fans who are critical of the group’s actions as ones who “fall for mistranslations,” again evoking the reality of linguistic and cultural multiplicity that need translating to begin with. By calling criticisms “mistranslations,” the tweet still invokes the reality of cultural diversity among fans, and thus vies for validity in the fandom debate that largely frames the issue as a matter of respecting transnational, marginal identities.

Mistranslation frames critique as inherently wrong, not unimportant, as if saying it would have had a place in the debate if it had been correct.

Conclusion

In my analysis, I have traced the multiple ways that fans negotiated transnational fan identities through the K-pop boy group NCT. I have found that fandom can be a site both of cosmopolitan solidarities and cosmopolitan fissures, which fans instrumentalized in ways that performed consumerist expectation, authentic marginalization, and fannish territorialization to meet both strictly fannish and certain political ends. Though these negotiations constituted distinct responses to the multicultural reality of a global fandom, all of them together recognized the tensions brought about by difference. Constructing their responses around this, fans envisioned different ways in which one can be a fan of pop media with such wide international reach.

Fans who responded to the issue by framing their disappointment as part of the consumerist experience placed a certain moral expectation on K-pop as an industry, seeing the deliberate project of globalization as a basis for intercultural respect. They constructed for themselves a certain moral obligation as fans within a transnational space, ensuring respect through cosmopolitan solidarity. There were also fans who valued authentic marginal identities, or simply being a person of color, as the more authoritative voice when it comes to issues of intercultural respect. This is where fissures along national, racial, and ethnic lines were re-inscribed, and the thesis of cultural homogenization attached to globalization is challenged. Even the performance of fannish territorialization invoked something akin to constructing borders—

Othering on the basis of which K-pop group one idolizes— further emphasizing the primacy of difference in the fan experience.

Relating to Ong's (2009) assertion of cosmopolitan identities as contextual and purposeful, these negotiations show that fans' situatedness in fandom is inextricable from their cosmopolitan constructions. In the above themes, fans never just converse exclusively with political concerns, nor just with fannish concerns, but with how both play out in concert within a global K-pop fandom. Indeed, performances of fan cosmopolitanism are influenced by context and purpose. Fans of border-crossing media are not only located in fandom and in a globalizing world, as though in isolation, but are rather situated within their intersections. Emerging from and coexisting within these intersections are ways of framing a fandom issue in terms of broader power dynamics and broader power dynamics as purely a fannish thing. In such contexts, marginal identities become instrumentalized, imbued with authority over ones not seen as peripheral. On the one hand, this may imply a destabilization of the traditional center-periphery dynamics that has long valued the hegemonic West as the source of all transnational media. But crucially, it may also limit any attempts at cosmopolitan solidarity, as the recognition of difference is not equal to understanding. What these negotiations show is a partial picture of what might be considered a cosmopolitan ethics (Chouliaraki, 2013; Silverstone, 2002) in the context of a global fandom. Preliminarily, the constructions I have focused on in this study would suggest that the recognition of difference is key to the formation of this ethics, and importantly, that something as trivial as popular media— even K-pop— may facilitate it. More specifically, a fan cosmopolitan ethics values various performances of anger and authenticity from the peripheries in the construction of its internal “language of consciousness” or the ways that knowledge about pertinent issues circulate within fandom (Sobré-Denton, 2015). The closer

your identity is to the global margins, the more authentic your anger is seen, and the more authoritative as an arbitrator of rights and wrongs within the global fan space. This internal moralizing logic serves to reconcile a global fan's enjoyment of what is seen as problematic media. The ideal is to foster transcultural understanding, or debates around it, so that the consumption of K-pop may feel guiltless and ethical.

Less explored here are the ways in and the extent to which these constructions are shaped by the logics of neoliberalism. My analysis so far has given me the starting point, at least, for this line of inquiry. That this fan cosmopolitan ethics values transcultural understanding insofar as it facilitates idealistic enjoyment primes questions about the individualistic tendencies of these moralizations. Furthermore, fans perceive globalized media not only as avenues for more diverse representations, but also ironically as representations tied to commercial agendas. They recognize that the industry uses cultural identities, often ones that have historically been marginalized, as concepts to market their hybridized musical product to a broader international audience. Globalizing media products, no matter the origin, no matter the geopolitical complexities they are embedded in, are also within the country that is capitalism. Arbitrary categorizations like “kfans” and “ifans,” and the assumed irreconcilable difference between them, are constructs developed within K-pop capitalism, and K-pop capitalism *specifically*; they are not inherent differences (G. Kim, 2019). It would be a valuable perspective to see how the industry, in turn, responds to such fan behavior, and what particular industry logics facilitate these categorizations that have come to significantly define contemporary K-pop fandom.

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