The Success Path and Hidden Concerns of the K-Pop: Systemic Mechanisms and Cultural Discounting in Cross-Cultural Communication

Qiupeng Geng

Fontbonne Academy, 02101, Boston, USA

Abstract: With the continuous deepening of globalization, cultural dissemination is imperative. From the perspective of "successful narration" of K-Pop, this paper discusses the successful mechanism of K-Pop's culture communication and makes a critical analysis of its current potential worries and long-term disputes. By reviewing and organizing existing literature, the conclusions of representative studies on cultural communication were summarized, shortcomings were identified, the development of Chinese idol culture was introduced, and the impact of K-Pop on C-Pop was analyzed. Future research directions were proposed. Ultimately, research on the success mechanism and controversies of the K-Pop can help guide Chinese popular music to avoid pitfalls such as homogenization and excessive commercialization.

1. Introduction

The K-Pop is frequently seen as a prime example of a "cultural power strategy", with its international expansion offering a tangible case for studying the transnational circulation of cultural content. However, this model has sparked ongoing debate: does its success stem from the interplay of state-led policies, market dynamics, and platform globalization, or is it largely driven by the fleeting advantages of fan-driven economies and algorithmic amplification? While much of the current research emphasizes replicable "success stories", neglecting deeper structural issues such as cultural discounting, gender representation, and labor conditions[1]. This paper conducts a systematic review to unpack the multidimensional mechanisms and media transformations underpinning the K-Pop's success. This paper reviews debates such as "superficialization" and "panderism", calling for a research shift from "experience replication" to "critical reflection". Furthermore, it further explores key implications, opportunities, and cautionary lessons that this model offers for the development of Chinese popular music and broader cultural dissemination.

2. Mechanisms of K-Pop Dissemination

2.1 The Multidimensional Mechanism behind K-Pop's Success: State-Led + Market-Driven + Platform Globalization

Research indicates that K-Pop's global success is inextricably linked to its unique industrial logic:

large economic conglomerates dominate the formation of an industrialized production system characterized by "selection—training—packaging—global expansion"[12]. The primary features of this system are manifested in the following aspects:

In the design section, this system preemptively pre-design products and messaging for overseas audiences[2]. For example, music production mixes multiple language elements, and artist image management adapts to different regional aesthetic preferences.

In terms of business model, it proactively leverages global digital platforms like youtube to build a "free dissemination—monetization conversion (covering performances, endorsements, and fan support economy)" model to expand international visibility and fan base[3].

At the competitive level, this system stands out particularly in comparative terms: Compared to J-Pop, which leans toward a "bottom-up" approach, and C-Pop which relies more heavily on the domestic market, K-Pop's distinct organizational structure, export orientation, and regulatory environment are regarded as key prerequisites for its global success[4].

Overall, the nature of this mechanism lies in transforming cultural products into replicable standardized commodities. It uses vertical integration along the industrial chain to reduce innovation risk, leverages digital platforms to break through geographic barriers, and ultimately realizes the paradigm shift from "Made in Korea" to "Global Consumption".

2.2 Media Transformation and Social Platforms: Fan Economy + Realistic Themes + Global Fandom

The media transformation driven by social platforms, particularly open distribution mechanisms like YouTube, TikTok, has lowered dissemination barriers, stimulated audience participation, and optimized content adaptation. It helped to systematically build a trinity ecosystem of "Fan Economy + Realistic Themes + Global Fandom".

Platform side: youtube-centric open distribution lowers entry barriers across languages and regions, such dispersal is reinforced by Tik Tok. By implementing a "free dissemination first, monetization later" strategy, K-Pop leverages free platforms' amplified influence and algorithmic recommendation capabilities to significantly boost content views and reach[3].

Audience side: By leveraging multilingual content and localized social media operations to drive fan engagement practices, such as fan-created edits and online chart campaigns, K-Pop consolidate dispersed fans into a "global fandom community". Through audience interaction stickiness, K-Pop has transformed fan emotional loyalty into stable consumption, breaking through cultural barriers and enhancing market penetration[5].

Thematic side: K-Pop integrates real-world themes compatible with short-form video dissemination, stage narratives, and performance aesthetics (high-intensity choreography, visual unity), enhancing the visual dissemination and secondary diffusion of related content on free platforms[6]. Thus, it achieves a balance between thematic depth and dissemination breadth.

However, although the above success mechanisms have been partially validated in comparative studies, there remains a lack of detailed evidence regarding algorithmic preference differences across different platforms (short-form/long-form video) and regions.

2.3 Critique of "Superficialization" and "Panderism": Cultural Hollowing and Gender Issues under Commercial Logic

Criticism primarily focuses on three aspects:

First, the "superficialization" of aesthetic expression and textual narrative. To achieve transnational dissemination, some cultural products dilute the uniqueness of local cultural codes and narrative depth. While forming an "exportable neutral pop style," it intensifies the reproduction of

cultural discounting[7]. This renders cultural products standardized commodities lacking cultural distinctiveness.

Second, excessive accommodation to platform and fans. K-pop currently faces issues such as shortened production cycles, heightened homogenization, and prioritizing performance over creation[8]. This signifies that "performance attributes" increasingly override "creative essence," further diminishing the originality of content and the dissemination of ideas.

Third, gender and labor issues. The training and management systems within the k-pop idol industry, coupled with the reproduction of "desirable and controllable" gender representations, raise ethical concerns regarding bodily, emotional, and temporal labor. Existing research provides concrete empirical support: field investigations into the trainee system reveal high-intensity training coupled with emotional deprivation during adolescence; the tension between female group members' bodily discipline and the gaze of desire; and the intertwining of fans' emotional labor with idols' physical labor[5]. These studies demonstrate that gender and labor issues are not abstract criticisms but structural contradictions inherent in institutionalized production logic.

2.4 Conclusions and Methodological Comparisons of Representative Studies

(1) Cross-national comparative study

Study of nie (2017)[9], with K-Pop as the core, proposes that the "three elements" - top-down industrial organization, export-oriented, and less government suppression - are the key to K-Pop's breakthrough through cross-border comparison with J-Pop and C-Pop. The study also highlighted J-Pop's limitations in organizational structure and business models, as well as C-Pop's characteristics in domestic demand drivers and censorship environments[2].

This study employs comparative methodology, excelling in its clear comparative framework that reveals structural differences and replicable conditions. However, it overlooks platform-level details and textual complexity, with insufficient quantitative evidence regarding platform algorithms and fan labor.

(2) Case Study of Idol Groups

Zhang (2023)[10] explored the cross-cultural communication pathways of K-Pop idol groups using EXO as an example. This study suggests that "multilingual member configuration, branding of narrative and visual unity, fan community governance, and offline performances - the dual wheel drive of online platforms" are important successful strategies.

However, this study lacks sufficient discussion on the tension of "localism" expression, and easily equates standardized communication modes with simply adapting to globalization. Although it can restore the operation of the mechanism, its representativeness and generalizability are limited.

(3) Research on Industrial Experience

Jiang (2024)[4] summarized insights from K-Pop for Chinese popular culture, proposing recommendations such as strengthening systematic training, establishing international production networks, and developing content ips. However, its assessment of transferability within Chinese institutional context—including censorship, platform governance, and copyright structures—remains rather general, lacking specificity and practical guidance.

This demonstrates that while industry analysis aids in understanding governance and capital networks, it must be integrated with user-side data and textual close reading to avoid falling into the trap of "policy omnipotence."

(4) Research on Cultural Transmission Strategies

Dan (2009)[11] proposed the "core-shell" strategy in his study on breaking through cultural globalization. This entails maintaining the continuity of aesthetic core while aligning with global grammar in narrative, genre, style, and technique.

However, this strategy struggles to resolve the boundary dispute between "de-Sinicization" and "de-stereotyping," potentially failing to preserve localized characteristics.

3. Research Limitations and Future Directions

3.1 Limitations and Suggestions

(1) Insufficient Evidence Chain: There is a lack of integration and causal identification of multi-source data across platforms (e.g., YouTube, short-form video, streaming media). Additionally, there is a shortage of quantitative research on value extraction from fan labor and its "hidden costs" (e.g., emotional investment, time commitment) [3]. Future studies could address this by establishing databases and developing algorithms to quantify and analyze such data.

(2) Inadequate Interdisciplinary Integration: The research fails to incorporate cultural studies, communication studies, industrial organization, labor sociology, and computational communication into an unified analytical framework[2]. There is a need to develop a comprehensive platform that integrates data and facilitates expert discussions to synthesize and consolidate key insights.

(3) Refining "cultural discount": the concept of "cultural discount" remains overly broad. It should be broken down into distinct dimensions—such as language, theme, values, performance style, and media format—to separately measure their impact and moderating factors on cross-cultural acceptance[6].

(4) Negotiation between locality and globality: there is a lack of empirical comparative studies on specific operational models of the "core–shell" dynamic[11]. Future research could explore different combinations of "local codes + global narratives" in content creation and "local operations + global channels" in distribution strategies.

(5) Ethics and sustainability: critical areas such as training systems, gender representation, protection of minors, and regulations concerning AI-generated content and virtual influencers remain underexplored[1]. Ongoing attention to evolving mechanisms and policy changes in these domains is essential.

3.2 Research paradigm: shifting from "experience summary" to "critical analysis"

Future research should further strengthen mechanism criticism and evidence orientation while recognizing the value of industry experience. The specific path can be summarized into the following three aspects:

(1) The research perspective should shift from "success narrative" to "conditional narrative". Moving beyond merely extracting lessons from "success stories", but to sorting out the boundary conditions and fragile points of institutional environment, capital structure, international relations, and platform governance, and revealing the deep constraining factors of industrial development.

(2) The research focus should shift from "industrial processes" to "cultural consequences". Rather than prioritizing unique production workflows, examine whether cultural discounts are genuinely overcome or merely deferred/masked.

(3) The research scale should shift from "macro comparison" to "micro data": while retaining the value of macro comparison, strengthen the micro examination of cross platform algorithm mechanisms, fan ecology operations, and localized communication practices, promote the combination of quantitative data and field investigations, and enhance the accuracy and persuasiveness of research conclusions.

4. The Development of Chinese Idol Culture and the effect of K-pop

4.1 The Development of Idol Culture in China

Chinese idol culture presents distinct characteristics of technology driven, virtual and real integration, and quality upgrading. The market continues to expand, with the virtual idol track performing particularly well. By 2025, the industry scale reached 120 billion yuan, up by 67% year on year, became the core growth engine.

(1) The deep application of technology reshapes the industry ecosystem. Ai generative technology endows virtual idols with emotional interaction capabilities, such as virtual singer "stareye" achieving a 3-second sell out through holographic concerts; brain computer interface and 5g-a technology are driving immersive experiences, allowing fans to "feel" their idols' emotions through neural feedback. The live streaming market has doubled to 4 billion yuan year-on-year.

(2) The talent show is transforming towards specialization and diversification. The industry is accelerating its "de-monetization", with talented artists crossing boundaries to become mainstream creators, such as top tier singers morphing into music producers and winning international awards, and celebrities enhancing fan resonance through real-life vlogs.

(3) The industry trend presents a pattern of "coexistence of virtual and real". The collaborative development of virtual idols and real celebrities has led to a profit margin of 58% for mango(tv)'s virtual artist department, far exceeding traditional talent management services; the fan economy has shifted from "supporting consumption" to "digital social currency", and 62% of millennial generation(post-2000s) believe that virtual peripherals are more status symbols than luxury goods.

Overall, in 2025, idol culture is transitioning from a "traffic oriented" approach to a new stage of comprehensive competition that combines technological empowerment, content quality, and emotional value.

4.2 The impact of K-Pop on C-Pop

K-Pop has profoundly reshaped the creative ecology and industrial landscape of C-Pop with its mature industrial system and communication logic.

(1) At the level of music creation, its diverse style provides clear references for chinese musicians, with a strong sense of rhythm, brainwashing chorus, and electronic music elements widely integrated into the works. Mv focuses more on visual impact and narrative, promoting the upgrade of c-pop aesthetic standards to audio-visual integration.

(2) In terms of industry model, k-pop's idol cultivation system directly inspired c-pop, and talent shows such as "idol producer" filled the market gap, forming an industrial chain from selection, training to debut. The cooperation between tencent music and sm entertainment will further deepen this influence, jointly building a "content co-creation fan operation" ecosystem, and even planning to launch localized idol groups.

(3) In terms of dissemination and overseas strategy, k-pop's "global local" approach has been successfully borrowed. "jumping machine" achieved overseas breakthroughs through multilingual versions, regional remixes, and short video co-creation, replicating its path of "building regional momentum first and then global amplification". This comprehensive impact from creation to operation drives C-Pop to accelerate its industrialization and globalization transformation.

5. Lessons for Chinese Popular Music and Cultural Dissemination

5.1 Directly Applicable Practices ("Hard Methodology")

(1) Start with outward-oriented product design. Music designers should develop a plan for "target overseas audiences + platform adaptation" during the concept selection and production phases, eliminating the traditional approach of "domestic fame followed by passive overseas expansion".

(2) Internationalization of Production Networks: Music producers establish global collaboration models for composition, choreography, visuals, and mixing, creating an aligned workflow of "international copyrights + localized narratives + platform specifications"[3].

(3) Multilingual and Localized Operations. The official channel adopts a strategy of "one main account+multiple localized sub accounts", using subtitles, thumbnails, and related memes to ensure content localization [13].

(4) Build a closed-loop model of "spread first, monetize later". Music merchants coordinate short and long-form video distribution, prioritize shareability and secondary creation agreements, and achieve commercial conversion through global tours, pioneering merchandise, brand co-creation initiatives, and membership services.

(5) Establish a fan co-creation mechanism. Fan engagement has shifted from decentralized operations to systematic growth, with clearly defined licensing agreements, song promotion data interfaces, and collaborative creative incentives (such as visual asset toolkits, open-source dance decomposition).[4].

5.2 Elements Requiring Adaptation to Local Conditions ("Soft Landing")

(1) Focus on institutional frameworks and regulatory environments. Regulatory authorities should explore alternative pathways for "symbolic expression and emotional resonance" within compliance boundaries to mitigate the combined risks of textual exposure and cultural discounting[8].

(2) Reduce "path dependence" on the domestic market. Large domestic markets often form a "comfort zone for internal circulation", and it is recommended to establish a "mandatory overseas KPI ratio" for global expansion projects to prevent domestic profits from squeezing out international growth.

(3) Balance local identity with global appeal by using a two-tier "core-shell" model. Core: drop in signature values, aesthetics, and regional vocals or instruments as discrete cultural markers. Shell: shape the genre, arrangement, visuals, and stage design to fit global popular syntax and platform specs.

(4) Strengthen team governance. Training or management should introduce labor protection, provisions for minors, psychological support, and appeal mechanisms to prevent an unsustainable "high-pressure high productivity high loss" model.

5.3 Issues Requiring Proactive Prevention

(1) Homogenization and "aesthetic fatigue." Each EP has at least one structural innovation in melody, rhythm, or arrangement, following the "style library and anti template" mechanism.

(2) Gender and body politics. The development of body narrative and character representation should be diversified to avoid enforcing a single "ideal body" standard.

(3) Data dependency and platform lock-in. KPI is not only equivalent to platform popularity, but also requires the establishment of proprietary communities and membership systems to hedge algorithm fluctuations[3].

(4) Excessive "de-sinicization." Cultural dissemination should not erase local imprints but rather

subtly incorporate indigenous cultural characteristics into cultural products[11].

(5) Copyright and compliance. Regulatory authorities should strictly control sampling, derivative works licensing, cross-border settlement, and tax compliance to reduce overseas legal risks.

6. Conclusion

Overall, K-Pop's success stems not from a single factor but from the triadic coupling of "industry organization—platform ecosystem—global market." Its underlying concerns are not peripheral phenomena but structural issues deeply intertwined with the same commercial-platform logic. Chinese popular music and cultural exports should mechanistically emulate K-Pop's "export-oriented upfront design and platform synergy," while adhering to a dual-layer strategy of "core-shell" in value and aesthetics, and prioritizing sustainability as the red line in governance and ethics.

Future research should adopt interdisciplinary and data-driven approaches. It needs to further refine the specific dimensions of "cultural discount" and clarify its mitigating mechanisms. Additionally, studies should conduct comparable evaluations of localization effectiveness across different platforms and regions. Such efforts will help transform experiential narratives into an evidence-based narrative that can be verified, replicated, and improved.

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