Parasitic or Symbiotic?: The Rise of the K-pop Adjacent Industries

Abstract. Korean popular music (K-pop) is a musical industry centered on artistic products of idol stars, but the K-pop industry is now supporting and supported by a multitude of lime-light eschewing and lime-light seeking people who are making a living through various K-pop dependent activities—a secondary yet autonomous industry. They teach K-pop dance, manage reaction and commentary channels, and provide K-pop related education and experiences. Beyond the entertainment agencies and singers, in tandem with K-pop’s success an entire industry has arisen that parasitically feeds off K-pop while also symbiotically amplifying it. The very public-ness of their activities gestures not at a subculture but at a side culture, spawning a fascinating and contradictory transcultural practice and dialogue. These new participants in these adjacent/dependent industry support K-pop fandom, and may become secondary stars nurtured by enthusiastic fandom. In this paper I explore the specific issue of the K-pop adjacent industries that are dependent on the same sources of finances—fans and the Korean government—that the industry relies on. I see them as primarily in two camps: performers and educators. Performers’ desire to be noticed collectively encourages creativity—the chief weakness of the hegemonic K-pop insiders, while educators deepen fan engagement with K-pop through dance classes, tourism experiences, and educational programs. In this paper I argue that the shadow cultures that spawned these industries have become an integral part of interacting with and understanding K-pop today, introducing and enabling personal encounters with K-pop even as the industry has grown.

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