Music and Youth Identity Formation in the 21st Century: 
A Sociological Analysis into Global Metal and K-pop Identities in a Cosmopolitan World

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When a young person identifies oneself as a musical genre fan, they are often not simply stating that they listen to a certain kind of music. Music is closely linked to youth culture, phenomena such as art forms, fandom, fashion, advertisement, and trends in visual and performing arts (Regev, 2019, pp. 90, 94). Thus, exploring various music genres or styles allows young people to participate in youth subcultures to experience and negotiate individual/group identities and different ideologies and aesthetics. According to the Birmingham School's research\(^1\), subcultures' emergence is associated with a group of young individuals in similar circumstances who defies mainstream society and dominant culture (GemmaSchiebeFineArt, 2014). As a characteristic of subcultures, the youth groupings may symbolically resist the society and parent culture by promoting their political or ideological identities through distinct appearances and styles (GemmaSchiebeFineArt, 2014). The Birmingham school explains such shared values and beliefs within a subculture as homology and the adjustment of objects' meanings to fit into these values as bricolage (GemmaSchiebeFineArt, 2014). Consequently, the different objects and styles associated with music and youth subculture have logical connections, aligning with one another.

As society becomes increasingly interdependent with globalization and technology in the postmodern era, youth subcultures become "far more fluid with less clear boundaries and less clear identities" (GemmaSchiebeFineArt, 2014). This means that youth today can identify with multiple group attachments stylistically without necessarily having or supporting a related political statement or ideology (GemmaSchiebeFineArt, 2014). The development of technology, mass media, and social media accelerates and contributes to the forming and defining sub-cultural style and attitudes that young people can easily experience and replicate nowadays. In other words, the digital era enables faster culture dissemination through, for example, musicians in the media or fandom representation, and thus helps the complex identity-negotiation process. Furthermore, as young people grow up and continue to practice the values and styles attached to a specific subculture, they become a distinct population with similar identities nurtured by popular music (Regev, 2019, p. 94). Therefore, music has become the prime instrument for socially constructing prominent practitioners of identities and cultures and contemporary society's "heralds of cultural

\(^1\) The University of Birmingham in Birmingham, England, is distinctively known for its contribution to cultural studies and sociology research (Webster, 2002).
cosmopolitanism" (Regev, 2019, p. 94). This paper examines the formation of individual, collective, global, and national-level identities through a sociological analysis of metal and K-pop fans in the 21st century.

Metal fan identity, metalhead, is largely stigmatized and marginalized in public conception (Gagnon, 2022). Identifying as a metalhead and engaging with metal culture/community comes with socially and culturally marginalized status and the publicly marketed image of being a metal fan, which is a narration of extreme negative examples: cultural outsiders associated with crime, drugs, violence, racism, satanism, and church burning (Gagnon, 2022). While many metal fans may embrace the social-misfit representation and even enjoy the public's negative perception of the genre as heavy metal is a subculture distinguished from the mainstream culture, one cannot deny that the metal community's rich diversity and authentic meanings are overlooked and misunderstood at large (Gagnon, 2022). A study done by Rowe revealed that despite the early academic researchers' narration of heavy metal music "as a risk factor for youth development," unprejudiced evidence to support this claim is lacking (2016, p. 1). The following paragraph demonstrates young metal fans in Australia's real accounts of the motive for and benefits of their early metal identity formation that counter the preconceived relationship between listening to heavy metal music and poor development outcomes, illustrating some authentic, positive examples of individual-level identities associated with the subgenre.

"I tried to make people aware that I listened to metal so [bullies in high school] wouldn't really pick on [me] that much….There’s that toughness element in metal… and that works in your favour at school, definitely" (Rowe, 2016, p. 14). Tim, who did not fit in well with his school peers, said (Rowe, 2016, p. 14). Next, Jake stated that embodying the public image of the scary metalhead following the "events like the school shooting at Columbine High School in 1999" helped him cope with bullying in high school (Rowe, 2016, p. 11): "It was a way to shield myself. It’s just like a defence thing . . . I mean, being metal is intimidating for some people…in a way it’s reflecting 'don’t talk to me [attitude,'] ….to kind of keep people at bay . . . at school" (Rowe, 2016, p. 11). In this case, identifying with the public metal persona prevented others from harassing him.

In addition to these metal youth who employed metal identities to protect themselves from social threats and choose to be excluded from popular peers at school, some other participants highlighted the subgenre's contribution to building self-confidence, individuality, independence, and friendships (Rowe, 2016). Still, the commonality among all the youth interviewed was their experience of exclusion (bullying, loneliness, rejection, disrespect, not fitting in, or being outcasted) in the pressures of high school life and social positions (Rowe, 2016, p. 10). Rowe contends that heavy metal can be a positive, protective factor for young people's "mental and emotional well-being in hostile social environments" (Rowe, 2016, p. 1). In other words, in Rowe's study, music allows youth to challenge and disrupt the dominant social norms and power relations at school and reclaim the power and agency of choosing and expressing self-identities (Rowe, 2016).

On a collective level, we can look at the Māori band Alien Weaponry in New Zealand, which represents and promotes their Indigeneity identities (language, colonial history, and Indigenous culture) through their thrash metal music, an extreme subgenre of heavy metal (Gagnon, 2022). The band members hope that their Indigenous values, strengths, and meanings expressed in their music will help educate the public about their painful history with British colonization, re-
vitalize Indigenous languages, and empower New Zealand's Indigenous people (Gagnon, 2022; REVOLVER, 2021). In one of their interview videos, one can unquestionably witness the band's and its fans' collective sharing and celebration of the Indigenous heritage through the distinctive musical subgenre and the ceremonial haka dance (REVOLVER, 2021). By internalizing the struggles and experiences of being an ethnic/cultural minority in their own country and externalizing/materializing them with unique energy and power that others can listen to and enjoy, music reaches the pinnacle of its pivotal function as a fluid individual/collective identity construction.

Moreover, this cross-cultural analysis of the band's music can be an excellent example of subculture at the level of the global through globalization, indigenization, and cultural cosmopolitanism. In today's society, countless sub-genres of metal music emerge all over the world as more people can easily experience and experiment with a wide variety of music via technology; consequently, diverse metalhead identities and fandoms of differing languages, cultures, or political backgrounds are created globally (Gagnon, 2022). Sam Dunn (2007) called this phenomenon a global tribe of metalheads in which mainstream metal music from the West becomes diffused into different cultural contexts through modernity (as cited in Gagnon, 2022). These "global tribes" do not just accept and copy the original but transform and adjust it to make it more suitable and native to the local culture (Gagnon, 2022). This process is called indigenization, in which a group absorbs, hybridizes, and localizes the globally circulating cultural materials into their own native traditions (Regev, 2019, p. 92). Subsequently, the many metalhead identities around the world that are uniquely diversified but also preserve their collective identities and values are explained through cosmopolitanism: the phenomenon of globally circulating cultural objects like genres, performing arts, and music becoming meshed into one world culture "while retaining [independent] features and a sense of singularity" (Regev, 2019, p. 92).

What about K-pop fan identities? As a globally-rising genre that emerged from a relatively culturally/ethnically-monolithic society and is now described as a leading example of South Korea's 'cultural imperialism,' scholars in the 21st century should study this distinctive music specifically in relation to pop nationalism and national-level identities (Ward, 2002, as cited in Joo, 2011, p. 496). K-pop is "a particular form of pop music produced in [South] Korea characterized by several features, such as young, same-sex group performers ('idols'); signature dance moves; and visually attractive music videos" (Lie & Oh, 2014, as cited in Yoon, 2018, p. 1). K-pop music consists of various musical genres and styles like "electronic dance, rap, rock[,] and more" meshed up together (Regev, 2019, p. 88), and the production system of its industry often collaborates with "global (primarily Western) producers, composers, and choreographers," making it sound not so distant from Western pop music (Fuhr, 2015, as cited in Yoon, 2019, p. 9). This musical form has been widely successful in East Asia beginning in the late 1990s, and it has become the leading vehicle of the 'Korean Wave' -- "the global circulation of Korean pop culture" -- across the world today since the mid-2000s (Yoon, 2019, p. 1). Since Korean pop culture has become increasingly visible in international markets, the K-pop industry and the Korean government have tirelessly worked on extending South Korea's biggest exportable cultural product's influence to reach the global music at large.

Such efforts met the biggest outcome via glocalization and digital media. K-pop's ability to "hide the place of origin" by accentuating the hybridity influenced by globalization materializes
by strategically analyzing and serving the global audiences' needs and preferences (Yoon, 2019, p. 9). One form of Korean pop music's de-ethnization and glocalization characteristics is linguistic hybridity displayed in many idols' debuts and activities in other countries. For example, TVXQ, a Korean boy band that dominated the East Asian music market in the 2000s and became the blueprint for subsequent K-pop idols, has made many albums and songs sung entirely in Japanese and Chinese (Madaan, 2021; Music 4U, 2020; One Two Three, 2020).

Today, this practice of K-pop adjusting its language to better suit different local contexts is more prevalent, mainly in English. Although South Korea has only one official language, Korean, its music industry has always utilized English in its lyrics for various reasons beyond global marketability (90dayKorean, 2022; Lee, 2004). This does not mean K-pop assimilates or erases its own identity as a nation or nation-state for global marketability (Yoon, 2019); As Lee puts it, the English used in K-pop can vary "from Koreanized English, which only Koreans can understand, to extremely idiomatic and colloquial American English," meaning that the English mixing still "convey[s] local cultural nuances" (2014, pp. 6, 19). She continues that K-pop's use of English has particularly been a primary "linguistic mechanism to create a pan-Asian bond" among young Asian fans with different cultural/ethnic identities, yet still upholding "each country’s local distinctiveness" (Lee, 2014, p. 19). Accordingly, one can assert that Korean pop emerged by indigenizing Western music and Japan's idol concept to create the multi-faceted musical genre mixed with the ethnic/cultural identity of South Korea (Regev, 2019). Then, K-pop made adjustments depending on the global contexts it aimed at, glocalizing its cultural product to extend its reach. Thus, as Joo argues, K-pop and Korean popular culture are Korean due to their "appropriation of and negotiation with global forces" situated within ongoing globalization, rather than ethnicization of essentialized integrity or authenticity of Koreanness (2011, p. 502).

Digital media also plays a considerable role in constructing and expressing today's sub-genre fan identities. In the information society, K-pop music videos, idols' social media platforms, and much more available online allow multinational fans to access content and virtually connect with the artists and their fandoms easily (Oh, 2013; William, 2016). According to William's study of Singaporean youth's K-pop music consumption, all the young fans interviewed utilized social media (their own websites/blogs, social networking sites for K-pop, K-pop forums, and more) to upload, remix, share, and receive multimedia content (2016, p. 88). The youth expressed the Internet's significance for "bridg[ing] the geographical gap that [they] felt would otherwise severely constrain their ability to maintain an interactive relation with K-pop culture" and for developing a sense of a larger fandom community, a group identity (William, 2016, p. 88). Moreover, in Yoon's study, digital media played a crucial role in diasporic Korean-Canadian youth's navigation of individual and group identities through K-pop (2018). Oh's analysis also predicted that technology development would be the new future of the Korean Wave's authentic cultural transmission to the global world (2013).

One can comprehend the Korean Wave's potency of economic and cultural influences in various ways: Korea became one of the most popular tourist destinations from gaining popular culture fans internationally (Joo, 2011; Oh, 2013); the Korean Wave phenomenon was credited with making many Korean brands such as "Hyundai cars and Samsung mobile phones more fashionable" globally by a leading media company in Korea (Ward, 2002, as cited in Joo, 2011, p. 496); similarly, a professor in Korea commented, “the Korean Wave shows we’re not just a
small country anymore” (Joo, 2011, p. 496). Considering the country's impressive history of "compressed modernity," in which Korea successfully rebuilt its culture and economy and made significant social advancements in just a few years following the turmoil from Japanese colonization, the Korean War, and the financial crisis of 1997 – 98, it becomes not surprising that the transcultural acknowledgment of K-pop and other Korean cultural products has evidently become the nationalistic pride and interest at heart (Joo, 2011, p. 490).

Further, "the elevation of Korea's status in the world" significantly contributes to the positive affirmation of ethnic/cultural identity as Korean, as well as Asian (Oh, 2013, p. 13). Oh emphasizes that K-pop and the Korean Wave have defeated the unilateral mainstream notion of viewing globalization as westernization -- mainly Americanization -- as globalization is widely recognized as an outcome of modernity and American popular culture (2013, pp. 5-7). However, as we have discussed, Korean popular music that has become a global phenomenon today is not a passive replica of American popular music; it is an indigenized, hybridized, and carefully reworked and glocalized culture that now rises to unsettle the hegemony of dominant American popular culture in the transnational context (Joo, 2011, p. 496; Oh, 2013, pp. 8-9). As a genre that has been loved by East Asia since the late 90s, one could even suggest that K-pop's increasing popularity in Western countries would empower young Asian K-pop fans' racial/cultural identities regardless of whether they are Koreans (Joo, 2011).

In conclusion, youth identities are tightly connected to music, which is itself inseparable from popular culture. Contemporary society's globalization and technological development bring diverse forms of music and subgenres together across the globe; consequently, distinct identities materialize and are constructed on various levels: individual, collective, racial/ethnic/cultural, national, and global. As the world becomes more interdependent, we face the positives and negatives of cosmopolitanism as 'world citizens.' Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai pointed out in 1996 that today's cultural globalization poses a crucial problem, "a tension between the cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization" (Appadurai, 1996, as cited in Oh, 2013, p. 8). Nevertheless, many cross-cultural local communities' forms of music, such as the Indigenous heavy metal culture in New Zealand and K-pop, demonstrate that the world's culture is not merely becoming homogenized or unilateral. Instead, more new, unique forms of localized and hybridized music surface to help the 21st century's youth navigate their multiple complex identities.
References


