Global Cultural Integration Strategies of Korean Entertainment Companies Regarding the Idol Culture Industry: The Case of SM Entertainment

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Abstract. The study focuses on the global cultural integration of Korean entertainment companies regarding the idol culture industry, using SM Entertainment as a case study for in-depth analysis. Idol culture, as a part of Korean pop culture, has achieved great success globally over the past decades. With the rise of digital media, the trend of internationalization in the entertainment industry has become more pronounced. The acceptance of different cultures by audiences in different countries has also become one of the focal points of research. This study will focus on SM Entertainment's successful practices in overseas markets such as Asia, with a special focus on how it has integrated the Korean Wave culture to satisfy the aesthetic and cultural needs of audiences in different countries and regions in order to increase its acceptability in the international market. The company's strategies in terms of artist image, music style, and promotional techniques are examined in depth. Ultimately, this study provides insights into SM Entertainment's success in achieving cultural integration and adapting to multicultural demands, which is important for understanding global cultural communication, the internationalization of the entertainment industry, and the dissemination of local culture in the international market.

Keywords: Korean Pop Culture, Media, Cultural Communication.

1. Introduction

As globalization continues to advance, cultural integration has become an important trend in the entertainment industry, especially in the field of Korean entertainment companies. As one of the highlights of Korea's cultural output, the idol culture industry has not only led to the popularity of the Korean Wave in the international arena but has also become a cultural link that connects viewers in different countries and regions [1]. In this context, the global cultural integration strategy of Korean entertainment companies has become one of the focuses of academic attention. A large amount of literature and research results have also been accumulated in the academic community for this type of study. However, most of the research literature was published before 2018, and there are fewer studies on the global cultural integration strategies of Korean entertainment companies in the digital era; this study aims to build on existing research to address this new trend of cultural integration.

This study will focus on the global cultural integration of Korean entertainment companies in the idol culture industry, using SM Entertainment as a specific case for in-depth analysis.SM Entertainment, as a leader in the Korean entertainment industry, has successfully integrated elements of Korean pop culture into local cultures through its practices in the Asian, North American, and European markets, earning widespread international recognition. This study aims to reveal how SM Entertainment has improved the acceptability of the Korean idol industry in the international market by integrating artist images, music styles, and promotional practices in its global communication in order to satisfy the aesthetic and cultural needs of audiences in different countries and regions. Through an in-depth study of SM Entertainment's strategies and practices, this research will examine how the company has established a strong global presence. In addition, this study will pay attention to the role of digital media and social platforms in this process and how SM Entertainment has leveraged these platforms to actively participate in the global fan community and promote interactive cultural resonance.

Eventually, through a deep analysis of SM Entertainment's success in achieving cultural integration and adapting to the demands of multiculturalism, this study aims to provide useful insights into global cultural communication, the internationalization of the entertainment industry, as well as the dissemination of local cultures in the international market. This not only has far-reaching significance for academics' understanding of the cultural impact of globalization but also provides practical experience and insights for practitioners in the entertainment industry.

2. Artists' Selection and Image Shaping

Every idol group has its own uniqueness. K-pop stars can quickly take their place in the hearts of their fans because of their completeness, standardized judging criteria, and a high degree of completion, from their vocal skills and dance skills to their attractive appearance and style. At the press conference for the SM Town Concert In Paris in 2011, Lee Soo Man, the founder and chief producer of SM Entertainment, explained the concept of Culture Technology that SM Entertainment has used so far. Culture Technology is used to explain the system used to produce, disseminate, and promote Korean cultural products to local and overseas consumers. The artiste development system is made up of several components, such as casting, training, marketing/management, and production [2].

SM Entertainment's unique production system has helped them succeed in overseas markets. Since 1995, SM Entertainment has endeavored to systematize and separate the selection, training, and marketing processes of its artists. They have specialized teams to take care of different aspects of artiste selection, training, production, music management, sales, public relations, and business partnerships. This systematic production system allows SM Entertainment to efficiently train and promote artists and provide high-quality music and entertainment products. In terms of nurturing artists, SM still uses the same system that has been in place since 1995, a selection process that takes place in more than 20 cities around the world [3]. Accepting and training trainees from all over the world has made SM Entertainment's artist system more global and accessible to a wider fan base. Furthermore, SM Entertainment was the first of many Korean entertainment companies to launch an overseas audition. In 1996, SM Entertainment launched its first idol group, H.O.T, which was based on the Japanese idol group SMAP. 1.5 million copies of their debut album. Overall, H.O.T sold more than 12 million albums and singles both domestically and internationally during their short period of activity. In addition, SM's other boy band, Super Junior, is being promoted under a different name, Super Junior M, in the Chinese market and is the first SM Entertainment idol group to have members of other nationalities. Similarly, NCT's Wayv is a boy group for the Chinese market.

SM Entertainment adopts a multi-layered strategy in artiste image creation to adapt to cultural aesthetic trends in different countries and regions. This includes gaining a deeper understanding of the cultural characteristics and aesthetic trends of the target market and precisely adjusting the artiste's image through clothing and hairstyle design, as well as social image management. Through collaboration with local designers and hairstylists, the company creates regionally distinctive clothing and hairstyles that retain elements of Korean fashion while incorporating trends from the target market. For example, when SuperM debuted in the U.S. in 2019, SM positioned it as the "K-Pop Avengers" and collaborated with Marvel on a limited-edition clothing line. In addition, by managing artists' public mannerisms and emphasizing social etiquette and cultural adaptation, the company has succeeded in building artists' affinity and strengthening emotional connections with global audiences [4]. For example, at concerts, artists are asked to greet fans in multiple domestic languages. This comprehensive and nuanced image-building strategy helped to increase SM Entertainment's acceptability in the international market.

3. Music Style and Team Design

In producing music, SM Entertainment employs a unique and innovative strategy by collaborating with leading experts in the fields of music, performance, choreography, and other areas. Moreover, through creative outsourcing, it creates a unique and charming music style for its idol groups.

For example, SM Entertainment partnered with Europe's Design Group to create Girls' Generation's hit song "Genie". The song was composed by Design Group, while SM's producer, Yoo Young Jin, wrote the lyrics and arranged the music, and the choreography was by Reno Nakashira Zaran. This international music production team injects a multicultural element into Girls' Generation's music, giving their work a more international character. This collaborative approach with overseas professionals not only enriches the music creation process but also gives SM's musical work a broader cultural connotation [2].

In terms of team design, SM Entertainment achieved early success in the Japanese market compared to other entertainment companies through artists such as BoA and TVXQ! In the Japanese market, SM collaborated with Sony Music Japan and Avex Trax to record and promote music. This collaboration was not only to expand the international distribution of the music but also to better adapt to the characteristics of the local market. However, K-Pop is gradually becoming more competitive in the North American market. In terms of the North American market, SM Entertainment launched SuperM, a male group created with CMG Group in the U.S. in 2019 [5]. The company's head said that SuperM will combine Eastern and Western cultures to showcase a distinctive music style. In this process, the company no longer limits its team design to traditional singing and dancing but defines music as a comprehensive artistic content product, collaborating on projects with Marvel and CAA, major Hollywood companies with global influence, to create a new universe of influential Korean culture. This targeted music production allows SM Entertainment to better meet the aesthetic and cultural needs of audiences in different regions globally, increasing its acceptability in the international market.SM Entertainment is committed to entering overseas markets based on its unique production system [5].

4. Advocacy techniques and the development of digital media

In SM Entertainment's cultural integration strategy, promotional techniques play a crucial role. Propaganda techniques can be categorized according to the two stages of the development of the Korean Wave.

4.1. Early Publicity for the Korean Wave

In the early stages, traditional media played a key role. At this stage, publicity relies heavily on traditional media platforms such as television, radio, and magazines. The Hallyu phenomenon began in 1995 when the South Korean government began to promote the development of the Korean cultural industry, especially film and music, through a series of policy measures. This period is known as the Hallyu 1.0 era, which marked the beginning of the popularity of Korean culture in Asia. Government support and investment created a favorable environment for the export of Korean music, films, and TV dramas [6]. Subsequently, the Korean government further increased its budget for the cultural industry by launching a series of events, such as the Asian Song Festival, which aimed to increase foreign tourists' interest in Korean culture [7]. This phase is known as the Korean Wave 1.0 era, which was mainly characterized by the popularity of K-Drama in Japan and China [8]. SM Entertainment carried out many overseas performances during this period, capitalizing on the popularity of the Korean Wave in Asia. The means of promotion during this period also relied heavily on offline forms to attract more attention and love from fans and other viewers. Since 2001, when H.O.T. came to China for a concert, SM Entertainment has continued to hold SM Town concerts in the Chinese market. Over the years, the company has been actively involving its artists in the "China-Korea Song Club".

4.2. Social media interventions in the digital age

However, with the advent of the digital era, the Korean Wave has entered a new phase, the Korean Wave 2.0 era. In this era, the rise of new media platforms has become an important factor in the Korean Wave phenomenon. Through social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, Korean cultural products began to spread rapidly to regions such as Asia, North America, and Europe. Young people became the main audience for K-pop music, which laid the foundation for K-pop's continued popularity around the world.

Social media plays a crucial role in the era of K-pop 2.0. K-pop continues to gain popularity in Asia and globally as a new genre of global music. In this process, the South Korean entertainment company SM Entertainment has adopted an aggressive strategy of cultural integration. They have fully utilized social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter to promote their artists and Korean pop culture. By utilizing these platforms flexibly, SM Entertainment has successfully interacted with fans and deepened the emotional connection between artists and fans. Meanwhile, the company produces high-quality music videos and promotes them extensively on social media, accelerating the spread of the Korean wave. This digital communication model has established a strong brand presence for SM Entertainment globally, especially in the Japanese market, where artists such as Girls' Generation have quickly topped the Oricon charts through social media, demonstrating the importance of this direct and swift mode of communication for international market recognition.

The K-pop industry has used social media and content-sharing platforms to promote K-pop music to overseas audiences, deepening the interaction between fans and Korean cultural products. In addition, celebrities' sharing of their private lives on social media has become an application of the front and backstage social scene, through which fans have been able to get closer to the artists' real lives.

4.3. Take the Bubble application as a specific example

SM Entertainment partnered with social software Lysn in February 2020 to develop Bubble, a chatting software exclusively for idols and fans. Bubble's main function is to allow celebrities and fans to have 1-to-1 real-time chats, just like regular social software. However, in order to use this feature, fans need to purchase a monthly pass for the respective artiste at RMB 27 each, which can only be purchased once per month. Once purchased, fans will be able to receive messages sent by the artiste and reply to three messages of up to 30 characters in length. The artiste can also see the fan's replies and will sometimes reply or like them.

In addition to live chat, Bubble has several other features, such as changing the chat background, setting the name of the chat room, translating messages from artists, viewing anniversaries with artists, and more. All of these features are designed to give fans a better experience and a sense of interaction. Bubble, as a social platform that only celebrities can join, definitely gives celebrities and fans a more private and safe space. For celebrities, they can express their thoughts and feelings more freely without worrying about being misinterpreted or attacked by the media. They can also learn more easily about their fans' feedback and suggestions and enhance their relationship and trust with their fans. For fans, they can have more direct contact with their favorite stars and feel their truth and warmth. They can also learn more about the star's daily life and hobbies, increasing their empathy and closeness with the star. They can also enjoy a sense of privilege and honor as they are among the few who can communicate with the stars in private. This is more indicative of the application of front and backstage social scenarios proposed by Goffman [9].

As can be seen from the examples above, in the age of digital media, promotional techniques have shifted from traditional broadcast media to more direct and interactive social media platforms. Through the use of social media platforms, South Korean entertainment companies such as SM Entertainment have succeeded in promoting Korean pop culture and artiste images globally [10]. The rise of social media has accelerated the spread of the Korean Wave, providing opportunities for cultural exchange and innovation on a global scale and enabling global fans to participate more directly in the spread and development of Korean culture.

Therefore, it can be seen that as the development of the Korean Wave continues to evolve, promotional techniques are also being innovated and transformed. From traditional media to digital media, SM Entertainment has been able to flexibly use a variety of promotional techniques to promote Korean culture and its artists at different stages, achieving the goals of cultural integration and global dissemination.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the global cultural integration strategies of Korean entertainment companies in the idol culture industry, particularly in the case of SM Entertainment, demonstrate the remarkable practice of successfully integrating local cultural elements and satisfying the needs of audiences in different countries and regions amidst the wave of globalization. Through an in-depth study of the company's strategies and practices in the areas of artist selection and image building, music style and team design, and the role of digital and social media, this paper not only reveals the mechanism of building its influence globally but also glimpses the new trends of the entertainment industry and cultural communication in the digital era. The careful crafting of artists' images, the innovative collaboration of music, and the flexible use of social media have together constructed the framework for the success of Korean entertainment companies in the international market. This success has not only raised the company's international profile but has also laid a solid foundation for the spread of K-pop and the Korean Wave around the world. In today's globalized world, this strategy of cultural integration not only has far-reaching significance for academics' understanding of the cultural impact of globalization but also provides practical experience and insights for practitioners in the entertainment industry.

However, the study faces some notable limitations worth noting. Firstly, the rapid development of the entertainment industry and the digital media environment means that research findings may lose some currency after some time. The dynamic and ever-changing nature of this field may result in the conclusions and findings of this study becoming irrelevant at some point in the future. Secondly, there is a degree of limitation in accessing and analyzing data. Despite the rich data resources provided by digital media, technical, legal, and privacy constraints may affect the completeness and accuracy of the data, thus limiting to some extent the full grasp of the true feedback from fans and viewers. Finally, this study chose SM Entertainment as the main subject of the case study, a choice that may carry a certain degree of preference. Although SM Entertainment has gained global attention as a leader in the Korean entertainment industry, using it as the sole case study may have led to the study of other entertainment companies being overlooked. Therefore, these limitations need to be carefully considered when interpreting the findings to ensure the objectivity and reliability of the conclusions.

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