

The Communication Mode of K-pop Korean Idol Groups from the Perspective of Cultural Globalization: EXO as an Example

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Abstract:

In recent years, with the acceleration of cultural globalization, K-pop has emerged as a significant cultural phenomenon, expanding from Korea to the rest of the world. K-pop idol groups have undergone continual renewal and replacement. As a prominent trendsetter of K-pop international idol groups, EXO has significantly propelled Korean pop culture into the worldwide market. The development history of EXO reflects how K-pop idol groups' culture and products have crossed geographical boundaries and gained recognition in the global market. Against the background of the prevalence of K-pop culture around the world, this paper will start with the examination of the international influence of the EXO group, analyze the important communication channels involved in the international spread and development of K-pop idol groups, and provide inspiration for the development of international idol groups in China. EXO's success provides valuable experience and inspiration for other K-pop groups. Digital platforms and the fan economy will play a greater role in creating a sustainable development of pop idol groups in the international market.

Keywords: K-pop; cultural globalization; idol groups; EXO.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the accelerating trend of globalization, K-pop as a cultural phenomenon has expanded from its home country of Korea to the rest of the world. Idol groups play a key role in shaping the ideological mainstream culture as the main object

of dissemination. In the excessive length of K-pop Korean idol groups that are constantly renewed and iterated, EXO took Asia by storm with the song "Roar". As an international K-pop idol group, EXO has attracted a large number of domestic and international fans with its mysterious character setting and grandiose cosmology, spreading the K-pop culture of

the Korean Wave to Central Asia, Europe and the United States, and rapidly creating a wave of K-pop around the world.

The development history of the Korean idol group EXO exemplifies how the cultural products of K-pop Korean idol groups have crossed geographical boundaries and gained recognition in the global market. Against the backdrop of the global prevalence of K-pop pop culture, this paper begins with the international influence of the EXO group by adopting pop culture theory. It further analyses how the K-pop Korean idol group represented by EXO has spread and developed internationally and provides suggestions for the development of internationalized idol groups in China.

2. Origin and Development of Korean Idol Groups

When the Asian financial crisis in the 1990s pushed the Korean economy to the brink of collapse, then President Kim Dae-Jung's government began to change its "manufacturing-based" industrial layout and set its sights on restoring the economy in the direction of the culture industry. 1998 saw the Kim Dae-Jung government clearly put forward its "Culture as a Nation" programmed and made cultural exports one of its key tactics. In 1998, the Kim Dae-Jung administration clearly put forward the programmed of "building a nation based on culture" and made cultural exports one of the important tactics. Subsequently, five consecutive presidents have continued to promote the export and dissemination of Korea's cultural industry globally under the "Culture as a Nation" programmed. The Korean government has not only supported the development of the cultural industry from the policy perspective, but also promoted the national strategy of cultural innovation and cultural export at the legal level, and the Korean cultural market has begun to flourish since then.

The popular culture of the Korean cultural market is mainly exported to foreign countries. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the main market for Korean pop music was the East Asian market centered on Japan and China. However, since 2019, there has been a significant increase in exports of Korean pop music to the North American and European markets, in addition to the Japanese and Chinese markets. The preface to the 2018 Korean Wave White Paper, the first edition of which was released on 30 April 2019, mentions that foreign media coverage of Korean culture increased by around 60% in 2018 Korean pop music, as well as the idol industry, used the years 2016 and 2017 as a starting point, after the second-generation Korean

pop songs and idol groups, which had previously enjoyed great fame and popularity, discontinued their activities or announced their dissolution, the third-generation idol groups rose rapidly, completing a natural transition between the old and the new [1].

Since 2018, the first object to be mentioned in the development of Korean pop music is EXO, a representative group of Korean pop songs that has exploded in popularity around the world, centered on the US market EXO has made it to the list of the number of awards won by artists around the world over the generations with 251 trophies, coming in at number 18 on the list. Its hit songs not only fell into the Billboard 200 record, and reached "five consecutive million-selling", but also entered the "Artist 100" ninth place to confirm its strong global influence, and became the first time that the cumulative sales of Korean albums exceeded the number of albums sold in the country after 2000, and the first time that EXO reached the number of albums sold in Korea. For the first time, the cumulative sales of Korean albums exceeded 10 million copies. EXO has also achieved unprecedented results in other overseas markets, where people are listening to the list on YouTube, Malaysia's listening to the popular Korean group EXO are ranked in the top ten, the Spotify platform has 500 million per month. The 500 million monthly streams of "Korean" music on Spotify come from Southeast Asia. In addition, on e-commerce platform Shopee, the demand for "Hallyu"-related merchandise in Southeast Asia has increased 4.5 times year-on-year [2]. This growth indicates the potential for Korean pop music to expand its market beyond the major markets of Japan and China to a wider region.

The development of the Korean idol market has grown along with K-Pop music. The three major Korean entertainment companies, led by SM, JYP and YG, were established in 1995-1997, and in 1992, the Korean group "Seo Tae Chee and the Kids" released its first album, followed by the official debut of SM's H.O.T. in 1996, which officially launched the "Idol Group + Pop Group". "Idol groups + pop dance music" as the main style characteristics, which is also the first generation of Korean K-POP idols. After entering the 21st century, the scale of development of the Korean idol group industry is beginning to take shape, in the first decade, BOA, Dongfang Shenqi, Myth, Super junior, Big Bang, Wonder Girls, Girls' Generation, 2AM, 2PM, and other idol groups have emerged, together to create the golden age of K-POP idol. At this stage, Korean entertainment companies in the star-making process is more systematic and professional, building a "trainee selection - trainee training - market planning - idol group selection - music production - distribution" of the complete process. Compared with the first and second generations, the third generation of idols, represented by

EXO, GOT7, winner, ikon, etc., is more globalized and relies more on the Internet. The business scope of Korean idol industry has also expanded to a broader field.

3. Components of the Communication Model and Their Impact

In the process of interacting with the idol, the fan community realizes the fissile diffusion of individual emotions. This diffusion is not just a one-way communication but forms a state of emotional resonance and sharing within the fan community. Fans' confirmation of their self-identity is not done in an isolated environment, but rather within the fan groups to which they belong. Fans need to express and confirm their emotions through interaction and sharing with group members. This interaction and communication allow fans to further strengthen and spread their emotions, thus forming a strong emotional community. The group concept sets K-pop idol groups apart from other forms of marketing. Entertainment companies use the core concept of group text and visual content, and since 2012 the group concept has been recurring in the group's presentation of planning concepts, both in terms of the content of the songs and the style of the members, which are all centered around the concept. For example, EXO's set-up of 12 super-powered aliens is unique in its planning (Figure 1). This unique concept has been well received by the Chinese fanbase, who are keen to interpret the concepts implied in the songs. When an idol returns with a new concept, the fanbase posts a different interpretation of the concept on social media platforms, and the introduction of the group concept gathers the fanbase together in solidarity with the idol group.



Fig. 1 Member superpower symbols

As seen in the debut pilot film, the superpower element corresponds to the setting of each person in EXO. In terms of character creation, this unique worldview setting not only matches the development of the concept story, but also succeeds in attracting a lot of attention leaving a deep and mysterious impression.

3.1 Content Creation and Artistic Expression

EXO's concept of superpowers has been controversial from the beginning and has become so popular that the group's achievements over the past ten years have proved that such a novel concept has been loved by fans (Table 1). This has led to the group being known as "the strongest conceptual idol". The stories they are trying to tell has been completed by rewriting it over the course of several albums (Figure 2). These sequels reveal clues through music videos, the group's ever-changing logo, and the reinterpretation of their members' personality traits and superpowers, all of which provide the framework for the subsequent albums and make it much easier to appreciate their work.

Table 1. Conceptual setting

Characterization	Character Superpowers	Realistic Crew Tone Characteristics
XIUMIN	Freeze	Explosive tone
LAY	Unicorn-like healing	Soda Tone
CHEN	Lightning	Shrill Tone
SUHO	Water	Soft Tone
BAEKHYUN	Light	Exorbitant
CHANYEOL	Fiery	Gloomy
D.O.	Force	Purest And Strongest
SEHUN	Window	Unstable sound color

KAI	Instantaneous movement, space travel	Main Dance
LUHAN	Move with one's mind	
TAO	Time is still	
KRIS	Fly	

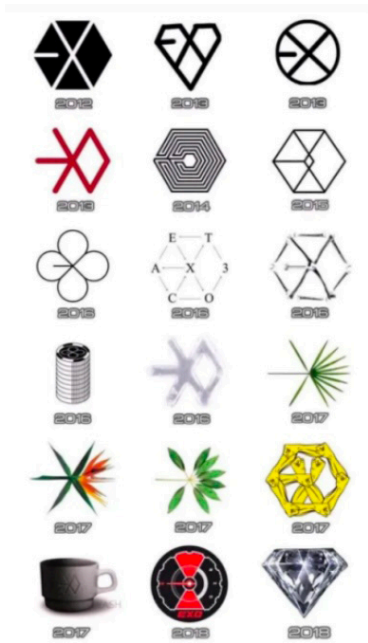


Fig. 2 Different album combination mean different things

3.2 Application of Digital Media and Social Platforms

According to Collins, a common focus of attention is when people focus their attention on a common object or activity, and the fan base itself is a community of interest aggregated by interest [3]. Chinese K-pop fans gather because of their interest in Korean idol culture, and then form a community.

3.2.1 Bubble Social Media

Lysn is a Korean mobile application created by the Korean company Dear U exclusively for SM. The app specializes in artist-fan communication and fan club membership through subscriptions. One of the services, Bubble, is SM Entertainment's Dear U's Lysn paid service (an online chat tool between idols and fans). For a monthly fee of 4,500 won, the fan base can receive messages, photos and videos from idol stars, while the idols themselves share their daily lives on Bubble. Through "Bubble," Korean idols are not just big, glamorous stars on the stage, but also "ordinary people" who exist in the daily lives of their fans.

To enhance this attribute of Korean idols, the design of the "Bubble" fan page is similar to that of an ordinary instant messenger. When an idol receives a message from a fan but does not check it, a number "1" appears in the chat box from the fan's perspective. The number "1" disappears when the message is checked by the idol, giving fans a "one-on-one" chatting experience with their idol. This allows fans to have a "one-on-one" chatting experience with their idols. It can be said that Chinese fans and Korean idols have constructed a "virtual intimate relationship" through "bubbles". Chinese fans are restricted by geographical factors. The bubble becomes the only way to have close contact with EXO members, which makes Chinese fans' spiritual needs satisfied.

3.2.2 Weibo

The social media microblog plays a very important role in EXO's Chinese communication. As a social platform with a large user base, microblog's immediacy and wide user base not only help EXO establish a close connection with Chinese fans, but also become an important channel for them to promote new works, share daily news and interact with fans, enabling EXO to quickly spread information, increase fan participation and loyalty, and enhance the team's popularity. Weibo's setting up of a special super-talk section for K-pop idols also reflects the focus of the Chinese K-pop idol fan community on interest. Different cultures have different "colors" and being a K-pop fan represents a love of Korean idol culture [4].

Guinness World Records Limited announced the first world record with Chinese social media in 2014. The record was set by Lu Han, a member of the South Korean boy band EXO under S.M. Entertainment Ltd, for the most commented blog post on the Weibo platform. This partnership between Guinness World Records and Weibo marks the opening of the door for Chinese social media by the world's most authoritative record certification body. This not only sets a precedent for record certification in the Chinese social media category, but also allows Chinese social media to provide more exciting and colorful content to netizens and customers through the partnership with Guinness World Records.

EXO's community functions on Weibo, such as the EXO Bar and Super Chat, provide a gathering place for fans to share information, pictures, videos and other content about

EXO, forming a positive and active fan culture circle. In the community's mind, it has the color of being the "official representative to the outside world" of the Chinese K-pop fan community, and most of the "Big Bars" can have direct contact with the EXO idol's agency. As a result, the Chinese fanbase is more "official", and EXO Big Bar put on a three-minute EXO-themed light show for EXO at the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the world's tallest building.

The Dubai Fountain in front of the Burj Khalifa performed a water spray show to the soundtrack of EXO's 'Power', which was chosen as the main theme for the water spray show in January 2018, proving EXO's popularity in the Middle East. After the water spray show, the Burj Khalifa instantly turned purple, with the names and faces of EXO members switching in turn, reaping many enthusiastic cheers and sing-alongs from fans. Prior to this appearance in the Burj Khalifa light show are mostly members of the UAE, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf royals, this time EXO Burj Khalifa light show, Chinese fans for their idols to send a big gift of the heart, the Asian popular group EXO also became the first group on the world's tallest building light show. The existence of this community enhances the cohesion between fans and further promotes EXO's popularity in China.

3.3 Online Live Streaming and Fan Interaction

The development and operation of capital constitutes the core driving force behind the content production of idol groups, while the capital operation groups of idol groups highlight the pursuit of economic interests. Therefore, the content created by idol groups not only contains purely cultural factors, but also reflects the economic demand behind capital operation. And in this process, live broadcast platforms have become an important channel, such as Tiger Tooth Live and Xiao Ka platform.

Tiger tooth live platform played a unique role in EXO China dissemination, live platform in the combination of entertainment and game live, through the co-operation with South Korea SM Entertainment, Tiger tooth live platform successfully introduced EXO such a top idol group into the field of live broadcasting. The popularity of the anchors Bian Bo Xian and Wu Shi Hoon on the day of their entry into the Tiger Tooth platform reached 2.6 million in just one hour, while the number of subscriptions has also exceeded one million, which is enough to see the degree of enthusiasm of the Tiger Tooth live viewers and fans. The EXO members take advantage of the live broadcasting platform's real-time interactivity, and interact in real time with the fans through live broadcasting, attracting a large number of fans to watch, which not only consolidates the original fan base, but also attracts fans

to live broadcasts through the novel form of live game broadcasting has attracted a new fan base, especially those young people who are interested in games. In addition to showcasing traditional music and dance performances, Tiger Tooth Live also provides space for EXO members to showcase their personal interests and talents, such as participating in live broadcasts of e-sports games such as Jedi Survival. This diversity of content not only enriches the fans' viewing experience, but also shows another side of the idols that is different from the stage, increasing their affinity.

Through the comprehensive use of multiple platforms, EXO has built a broad fan base in the Chinese market, forming a positive community culture and strong brand influence. Each platform has its unique advantages and characteristics, and EXO has developed corresponding communication strategies based on the characteristics of different platforms to achieve effective interaction with fans and efficient dissemination of information.

In addition, for fans, the appearance of small cards (idol photo cards) makes up for the emotional void in the supposedly emotionally oriented fan community due to the distance between time and space and is a kind of deep-seated identity symbol and emotional symbol. Chinese K-pop fans often bring small cards to tour and take photos. Theoretically, the process of purchasing the cards should be that the fans place the order directly on the official website of the agency of their favorite Korean idol group. However, due to the cumbersome nature of cross-border purchases and the high cost of postage, in recent years, it has been common for Chinese fan stations to negotiate with peripheral sales platforms to open links to buy on behalf of the group, and then the fans place their orders. To promote album sales, South Korean agencies choose to buy an album randomly attached to a member of the photo card. Buying the number of albums corresponding to the number of members of the group will get all the members of the photo card. To ensure they get the photo cards of their favorite members, fans usually organize group purchases through Chinese fans stations. This practice, in the Korean circle commonly referred to as "carpooling" means [4].

The anthropologist Robin Dunbar's "hair-combing alliance" suggests that group interactions controlled within a certain number of people are necessary to maintain alliances and build and strengthen social bonds [5]. The object-connection briefly removes the conflict between different fan attributes and focuses fans' attention on idol symbols. The leader of three generations of idol groups proved their market dominance once again in 2023. In that year, their total small card sales reached 2,361,471, surpassing those of fourth- and fifth-generation groups,

placing them firmly at the top of the list among many idol groups. This achievement not only reflects EXO's enduring charm and commercial value as an idol group, but also highlights the unwavering support and love from their fans.

3.4 International Co-operation and Cultural Exchange

EXO performed for the closing ceremony of the PyeongChang Winter Olympics in South Korea in 2018. In a New York Times article about the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics and K-Pop, an EXO stage photo was used to introduce their performance at the closing ceremony and to introduce K-Pop groups to the global Olympic audience. After the closing ceremony, EXO was featured in a promotional video for French sports channel *Very Good Trip* in Korea. In the 43-second trailer that was released recently, EXO was the only K-Pop group featured, performing a short rendition of "Power" on the spot.

EXO was also selected to perform at the 2014 Incheon Asian Games, where their outstanding performance not only embodied the vitality and hope of Asian youth, but also received a round of applause from the audience.

Since their first year of debut in Hong Kong "2012 MAMA Music Awards" won the newcomer award, EXO after six years of transformation into a group of great power to win many awards, the sound source of the major charts, the regular album sales exceeded the million marks, the total sales of albums exceeded ten million, and often break various records. From the newcomer award to today's five even, "MAMA Music Festival" witnessed EXO step by step on the road to the top, EXO reigned supreme in the music world unstoppable.

4. Suggestions

4.1 Create a Multi-Platform Layout, Strengthen the Construction of Cultural Communication

The strengthening of contemporary science and technology and the combination of commercial, political and cultural forces, so that the media system has built a powerful hardware and software network and make it exist and operate in the whole society all the time [6]. Korean pop culture K-pop idol groups in the global popularity cannot be separated from the enterprise media culture dissemination. South Korean entertainment enterprises not only attract young people from Asia and around the world to engage with idol groups through traditional media, such as television talent shows like "Produce101" and other variety shows, but they also continuously export their cul-

ture through domestic and foreign international platforms, such as X, YouTube, Instagram.

China's pop culture can learn from South Korea's experience to maintain self-innovation. Firstly, focus on localized content dissemination by drawing on China's rich historical and cultural resources to create idol groups with Chinese cultural elements. Secondly, China should jointly develop multinational combinations, attracting multinational talents, and capture the attention of international fans to enhance the international influence of Chinese pop culture. Finally, focus on the construction of fan culture by strengthening the cultural and emotional identity of fans, encouraging co-creation of content, and using new media technologies such as AR and VR to create virtual concerts and immersive music videos, further enhancing the bond between idols and.

China's cultural communication construction implements an internationalization strategy, injects new vitality into the development of the domestic cultural industry, and realizes the global influence of Chinese pop culture.

4.2 Create an Open Environment and Jointly Help the Internationalized Market

The government as a market subject plays a crucial role in creating an open environment and promoting the internationalized market. The success of Korean K-pop culture and idol groups cannot be separated from the double support of the government and enterprises. The government has not only introduced a series of policies to support the development of the cultural industry. It has strengthened the protection of intellectual property rights and safeguarded the legitimate rights and interests of creators and enterprises. Also, by building an international cultural exchange platform and using K-pop as a tool for cultural diplomacy, cultural exchange activities can enhance friendly relations with other countries and create a good atmosphere for economic cooperation.

Through policy support, platform construction, market promotion and risk control and other efforts, a synergy between the government and enterprises is formed to jointly promote the development of the international market of the cultural industry, realizing both economic and social benefits.

5. Conclusion

EXO's music and visual content maintain high international standards and meet the high expectations of fans. SM Entertainment employs diverse marketing strategies and expands EXO's influence and market coverage through multi-platform operations and multi-channel promotions. As an international group, EXO's deep understanding of

the K-pop market and the launch of works and cultural products that resonate with fans have strengthened a sense of cultural identity. Frequent member interactions and extensive fan benefits have established a solid fan base in the K-pop market and formed a positive word-of-mouth effect.

In summary, EXO's success in the K-pop market provides valuable experience and inspiration for other K-pop groups, promoting the diversification of K-pop communication paths and achieving in-depth localization strategies. Along with the popularization of digital platforms and the expansion of the fan economy, these strategies will play a greater role, creating more opportunities for the sustainable development of K-pop groups in the international market.

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