

Platformization in Local Cultural Production: Korean Platform Companies and the K-Pop Industry

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This article examines the dynamics of platformization in the ongoing expansion of two leading platform companies in Korea (hereafter Korea) into Korean popular music (K-pop) production and the major K-pop labels' responses trailing this expansion. Our analysis indicates that NAVER and Kakao see K-pop production penetrating the global market and providing a continuously growing new revenue source. In contrast, K-pop labels see platforms as an avenue to expand the small Korean market by developing new markets abroad. This article reveals how the capital strength and technological advantages Kakao and NAVER enjoy in the ongoing platformization of K-pop production threaten the creative independence of K-pop producers. Finally, we examine how the increasing dominance of the two platforms in production and distribution has affected the K-pop industry and suggest how K-pop creators may push back.

Keywords: platformization, culture, K-pop, Kakao, NAVER

Until recently, global platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, dominated the online delivery of South Korean (henceforth Korean) music and film outside East Asia (Min, Jin, & Han, 2018). Indeed, much of the global popularity of K-pop groups, such as BTS and BLACKPINK, was possible with music streaming services and video platforms with global reach. In this regard, the international success of Korean cultural products, notably Korean pop music (K-pop), encouraged Korea-based tech companies to seek a share of this lucrative and growing global marketplace. In particular, the entry of NAVER and Kakao—two Korean platform conglomerates that dominate the domestic search engine market and the domestic messaging application market, overwhelming foreign competitors, such as Google and WhatsApp, respectively—has created a unique dynamic that challenges the unilateral imperialism of global platform behemoths (Jin, 2015; Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). They also expanded their business to nearby markets (Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand) and became exceptional cases of domestic

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apps that outperformed Google and WhatsApp in these markets.¹ Consequently, their services are used as major tools for delivering Korean cultural products to the global market by engaging in all stages of cultural production. In return, platform companies' technological and financial strengths, notably NAVER and Kakao, challenge K-pop producers and incumbent labels to compromise their autonomy to benefit from platform giants.

Based on this explanation, this article discusses the integration of platform and cultural industries to comprehend the new logic and specificity of cultural production emerging in local cultural markets by analyzing the relationships between NAVER, Kakao, and K-pop companies. To date, most research on platformization has focused on the Western media industry and U.S.-based platforms, but more attention needs to be paid to regional platform companies in Asia (Kim & Yu, 2019; Steinberg, 2020). Moreover, few scholars have noticed the growing role of platforms in the K-pop industry, despite considerable research on K-pop fandom culture and artists' emotional labor. This article aims to help fill this gap by exploring the background and strategies of NAVER's and Kakao's platformization of K-pop production.

Our approach uses a mix of critical political economy and cultural industries theory. Critical political economy is helpful because it focuses on the power asymmetry between those who control the technologies and the other actors in the processes of cultural production (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Mansell & Steinmueller, 2020). The cultural industries approach enables us to examine the distinct attributes of various cultural products and the different stages of their production and monetization, thus overcoming the limitations of the traditional critical political economy's more holistic perspective (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Miège, 1989, 2011). Furthermore, the cultural industries approach recognizes that cultural production encompasses various forms of genre and media with unique dynamics and institutional characteristics that coexist and change continuously as new technologies are introduced in relation to larger developments in capitalist society (Garnham, 1990, 2005; Miège, 1989, 2011).

Hence, this article focuses on Kakao and NAVER and their relations with major K-pop labels, such as SM Entertainment and HYBE Corporation (hereafter SM and HYBE), the main actors in the industry. We aim to analyze the platformization of the K-pop industry by the two domestic platform behemoths and to explore the new forms of K-pop cultural production resulting from it. We see platformization as integrating platform and cultural industries rather than simply threatening the artistic autonomy resulting from capital's intervention in the cultural industries, assuming that cultural production has evolved with changes to culture commodification (Garnham, 1990, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013; Miège, 1989, 2011; Mosco, 1996; Winseck, 2011). First, we discuss platformization in cultural production, focusing on the impacts of platformization on power relations in cultural industries, and then we examine the economic predicament of Kakao and NAVER in the mid-2010s. Using a mix of official statistics on the Korean music

¹ NAVER's market share in the Korean search engine market is 56.1% as of 2022, compared to Google's 34.7% (Jobst, 2022a). LINE, operated by NAVER's Japanese subsidiary, dominates the Japanese, Taiwanese, Taiwanese, and Thai markets, with 1.78 million monthly active users (MAU) in those countries (Ganbold, 2022). Kakao Talk's market share in Korea is about 87% as of 2022, with about 47 million MAU (Jobst, 2022b).

industry, annual business and audit reports, PR materials from Kakao and NAVER, and news articles, we show that platformization was a key part of their response to the predicament.

Finally, this article explores the new forms of K-pop content that platformization enables and analyzes the impacts of platformization on the production and circulation of K-pop cultural products. We focus on infrastructural changes and governance issues to answer the following questions: How have the two platforms taken advantage of the reorganization of the music industry around platform services as a business opportunity, and how has this complicated the relationships between platforms and creators? Our findings shed light on the interests of both sides in the ongoing platformization of cultural production in the Korean context and, more fundamentally, on the power dynamics embedded in platformization.

Platformization in Cultural Production

The entry of platforms has shaped new practices in the cultural industries that entail dramatic changes in the entire process of cultural production, from cultural creation to distribution, marketing, monetization, and consumption (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Jin, 2015; Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy, 2022; Zhang, 2021). These changes alter the relations between the actors involved in cultural production. One important result is a shift in power relations. Platforms are more than just a matter of software, algorithms, or intermediaries. As infrastructures in the cultural domain, they always carry the cultural biases, values, and preferences of both the content creators and the companies involved in production and distribution (Jin, 2015). They create an ecosystem of platforms and ancillary services that profoundly impact the actors in cultural production, including cultural producers, advertisers, data intermediaries, and merchandisers. These impacts mediate users' interactions with these actors and products to maximize profits (Krumsvik, Milan, Ni Bhroin, & Storsul, 2019; Mansell & Steinmueller, 2020; Van Dijck et al., 2018).

Platforms are not merely intermediary models because they continuously harvest user data to make their services and products more attractive to demographics. Platforms also encourage user participation and, in some cases, user-created content and monetize them (Mansell & Steinmueller, 2020). Thus, platforms should be distinguished from the mere digitalization of audiovisual material (Poell et al., 2022). Legacy media companies and OTT services cannot be categorized as platforms, even if they collect user data for content curation or production. They produce or license original content using their IPs exclusively, and unlike platforms, they do not use independent cultural producers' IPs or user-created content.

Moreover, third parties, including users and cultural producers, have few rights to publish content or products autonomously and monetize them in relation to these companies. Platforms are characterized by openness to actors in the platform ecosystem on which their monetization model depends. The commodification model of platforms is a hybrid of the advertising-supported model of legacy media and the direct-sale model of films and music (Winseck, 2011). Financing platformized cultural industries relies on network effects generated by users, for example, targeting advertisements based on user data and direct commodification based on purchases of individual products, service subscriptions, and intermediation of transactions. Platformization can thus be understood as "the penetration of economic, governmental, and

infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the media industries" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276).

Platformization entails changes across all three main facets of cultural industries: market structure, infrastructural integration, and governance (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2022). First, platforms decentralize the structure of existing cultural industries and expand the scope of industry actors, including inviting new creators to the production and delivery process (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020; Cunningham, 2018; van Dijck, 2013). Acting as "matchmakers" for the needs and demands of the actors, they provide companies, individual producers, and even amateur creators with new opportunities to generate revenues and diversify sales channels. However, when a small number of global platform behemoths dominate, economic power is centralized around them (Gorwa, 2019). Even though these platforms rely on cultural producers for content, the bargaining power of producers decreases (Baym, 2018; Marshall, 2015). Producers are reduced to the role of complementors providing services and products for the operation of platforms (Poell et al., 2022). In addition, since the platforms provide the tools and services necessary for the online circulation of cultural products, platforms become an infrastructure at all stages of cultural production (Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019; Zhang, 2021). They first replace the infrastructure of existing media industries by integrating them into platforms (Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018; Poell, Nieborg, & Van Dijck, 2019). Consequently, the format of cultural products (genre, length, and style) changes to be compatible with the platforms. This makes cultural producers increasingly platform-dependent and shifts governance in the market. With control of the infrastructure, platforms can dictate to the actors engaged in cultural production.

With this shift in governance, platform policies, such as user guidelines and pricing, began to govern producers. Platform companies become gatekeepers, selecting the cultural products that meet their standards and forcing complementors to prioritize the platform companies' policies and interests rather than their own (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020). Moreover, platforms select, curate, and modulate cultural products largely through technologies such as algorithms that direct users' consumption by determining and filtering which content will be exposed to which users (Bonini & Gandini, 2019; Eriksson, Fleischer, Johansson, Snickars, & Vondereau, 2019; Napoli, 2014; Prey, 2020). Thus, content monetization and cultural producers' revenues fall increasingly under platforms' market governance (Gillespie, 2018; Marshall, 2015). In other words, platforms are, by no means, neutral technical intermediaries. They are economic entities that pursue their interests by customizing computational interfaces and content delivery systems (Jin, 2015; Van Dijck, 2013).

It is worth noting that platformization is more than just a top-down process. Cultural production through platforms remains a contested process of continuous struggle between the various actors within cultural industries, including platform companies, rather than just the dominance or commodification of the industry by platform capital (Miège, 1989, 2011). Depending on their technological capabilities and the competitiveness of their products, cultural producers and third-party groups can push back and articulate their strategies and interests (Prey, 2020). The dynamics of platformized cultural production are shaped by various competing interests. Platform companies seek to expand their service ecosystem, cultural producers seek global connectivity, universal accessibility, and positive network effects, and users constantly evaluate

the quality and appeal of platform services and content while interacting with producers and other users (Flew, 2021; Van Dijck et al., 2018).

The Entry of Platform Companies Into the K-Pop Industry

Crisis of Korean Platform Companies

Over the last few years, NAVER and Kakao have become important players in Korean cultural production. Grounded in their dominance of the Internet and mobile services, they have generated revenue from both producers and users by creating platforms that aggregate content to audiences and have increasingly influenced the nation's cultural production. It was generally understood that platform companies did not create content but merely mediated transactions between complementors, advertisers, and end-users and monetized the user data collected (Langley & Leyshon, 2017; Mansell & Steinmueller, 2020; Poell et al., 2019; Srnicek, 2017). Platform companies, aiming to secure stable revenue sources and maintain their dominant position, have grown by expanding their service boundaries and acquiring or merging with competitors, especially start-ups that could be future competitors (Srnicek, 2017; Won & Park, 2021). In this way, they build a platform ecosystem to achieve economies of scale and scope in data utilization and grow their profits continuously (Mansell & Steinmueller, 2020; Poell et al., 2022; Van Dijck et al., 2018). NAVER and Kakao pursued this strategy until the 2010s, when they faced three crises stemming from the difficulty of competing against global platform giants in a relatively small Korean domestic market. Their advertising revenues had become unstable, the global platforms were gaining an increasing market share, and the small domestic market was nearing saturation.

The need for a more stable source of revenue came to the fore due to slow growth in the advertising market. Since 2013, sales in the PC-based advertising market have decreased, and with the smartphone penetration rate exceeding 70%, the total digital advertising market has grown by only 11.7% per year from 2013 to 2017, contrasting with the average annual growth rate of the digital advertising market in the 2000s, which was 33.6% (National Information Society Agency, 2021; Won & Park, 2021). Meanwhile, the market share of global platform giants, especially YouTube and Facebook, began to spike in Korea. Facebook's share of the social media sector rose from 12.6% in 2011 to 35.8% in 2017, achieving the top in the market (Jeong, 2020), and YouTube's share of the video platform market increased from 15% in 2009 to 86.1% by 2017 (Park, 2018). This growing foreign penetration of the domestic market resulted in tension between domestic tech heavyweights and global players. The disproportionate influence of global platforms seemed to threaten both Korea's cultural industries and its e-commerce sector with incorporation into the order of transnational platform capitalism (Jin, 2015; Won & Park, 2021).

Meanwhile, the duopoly in the domestic Internet industry had been entrenched, and the market had become saturated. Despite the high Internet usage and smartphone penetration rates of 90% and 87% in 2017, respectively, NAVER and Kakao could no longer increase their market size by securing new users (Korea Communications Commission, 2022; National Information Society Agency, 2021). To remain profitable, they had little choice but to expand beyond the local market. However, despite strong inroads into the Taiwanese and Japanese markets through NAVER's messaging app LINE, other attempts to export their services to the Asian regional market failed (Won & Park, 2021).

However, the remarkable international popularity of K-pop presented NAVER and Kakao with an opportunity of a different kind. Between 2010 and 2015, exports of K-pop products increased in value from 83.26 million USD in 2010 to 381 million USD. K-pop thus offered a high-potential new revenue stream in the global market (Korean Statistical Information Service, 2022), while the relatively small size of the record business made it an affordable investment target. Simultaneously, the increasing use of platforms to consume music presented a golden opportunity for experienced online service providers to expand their businesses into the recording industry (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, 2021).² The two Korean platform giants recognized that K-pop and related intellectual properties (IPs)—recordings, live performances, games, and merchandise—had become a globally verified brand and a lucrative revenue source for stakeholders, including platforms (Kim, 2019). This made them expand their business to the production and distribution of K-pop.

Platforms' Expansion Into K-Pop

Korean platform companies have used K-pop as a countermeasure in their asymmetric competition with global platform giants and as a key part of their overseas expansion strategy. In September 2015, NAVER launched V LIVE,³ a paid live-streaming and fan-community platform that enables K-pop artists to broadcast live videos and post performances and vlogs, and global users to communicate with them in live chat sessions. Thanks to the high use of fans thrilled by the opportunity to communicate with their idols in real time, NAVER generated revenues through subscription fees and direct sales of high-definition or unreleased content and related merchandise. In contrast to YouTube, which remained more of a platform for sharing user-generated videos, as well as other competitors like Dailymotion and Vimeo, V LIVE was unique from its inception. It was a comprehensive cultural production and distribution platform that used K-pop artists' brands and IPs by integrating interactive streaming with production and distribution. The platform could provide services using advanced live-streaming technologies that made fans feel engaged in the daily lives of K-pop artists through live-streaming content, exclusive videos, and performances, something YouTube and other legacy streamers could not provide (Jeong, 2019).

The growth of V-LIVE was remarkable. In 2019, NAVER's exclusive live broadcast of BTS's concert at Wembley Stadium in the United Kingdom received 140,000 viewers worldwide. Furthermore, thanks to aggressive promotion of the platforms' live-streaming capabilities, by April 2020, a live show

² According to recent statistics from the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI, 2021) across 21 countries, more than two-thirds of the audience listen to music through streaming services—subscription music streaming (23%), video streaming (22%), short-form video applications (11%), ad-supported music streaming (9%), and social media (3%).

³ V LIVE (also called V App) was released in August 2015 and now supports nine languages, including Korean, English, and Mandarin. Having focused from the beginning on K-pop artists' live streaming and real-time communication with fans, the service has grown into a vital promotional channel for K-pop agency content (live shows, music videos, etc.). In addition, users can subscribe to artists' channels to check schedules, get preferential reservations for concerts or fan meeting events, view premium content, and purchase merchandise available only through these channels. This service terminated as of February 2023 as it merged with WeVerse.

by a K-pop boy group SuperM's using augmented reality (AR) technology and multi-cam features in collaboration with SM got 75,000 global viewers, generating two million USD in sales of access sales and SuperM-themed merchandise (Yoon, 2020). In the same year, NAVER invested 83.6 million USD in SM to develop Beyond LIVE, an online concert brand, to secure the label's intellectual properties and the right to broadcast concerts of its affiliated artists online.

Unlike NAVER's strategy of partnership with K-pop agencies, Kakao has sought to launch K-pop-related online services through vertical and horizontal conglomeration. In 2016, the company paid 1.56 billion USD to acquire Loen Entertainment, a recording company whose online music streaming service, Melon, had a nearly 50% share of the domestic market. Kakao aimed to use Melon's subscription system and its strong presence in the market to increase cash flow and promote other music-related content sales (Hong, 2021). In a similar vein, Kakao established a subsidiary, Kakao M, in 2018 and acquired five major music labels, seven talent agencies, and six production companies for film, drama, and performances. In 2021, Kakao established a full-spectrum media company, Kakao Entertainment, to incorporate all of its media production enterprises, including its production studios and webtoon and webnovel channels previously managed by Kakao Page and Melon, to further diversify its media conglomeration. Through this aggressive conglomeration strategy, Kakao established a value chain that controls the entire production and delivery process of music and other cultural products, from the intellectual properties of K-pop artists to the aggregation of recordings and live performances.

Distribution of K-Pop Content via Platforms

The entry of NAVER and Kakao into the production and distribution of K-pop content through platforms has built a worldwide audience for K-pop content, generated huge sales, and become a key revenue source for the K-pop industry. BTS's online concert "BTS Map of the Soul ON:E" (Big Hit Entertainment, 2020) in October 2020 garnered nearly one million viewers in 191 regions worldwide and brought in 45.2 million USD from ticket sales alone (Hong, 2021). BLACKPINK's January 2021 concert had 280,000 viewers worldwide and earned NAVER more than 8.36 million USD (Hong, 2021).⁴ In this regard, Table 1 explains the contribution of the content business to the revenues of NAVER and Kakao.

⁴ Besides transforming the NAVER and Kakao business model, the delivery of online K-pop content through platforms has reshaped global K-pop consumption. In 2020, the K-pop business earned 680 million USD from overseas markets, an increase of 299 million USD since the advent of V LIVE in 2015. K-pop exports to North America, which accounted for only 0.3% of the K-pop industry's total exports in 2015, surged to 12.8% (86.7 million USD) by 2020. Exports to Southeast Asia reached 122.8 million USD, 18.1% of total exports of K-pop products to the region in 2020 (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, 2022). These numbers result mainly from increased access to K-pop products by global users of NAVER or Kakao platforms. Given that V LIVE alone has been downloaded more than 100 million times worldwide and that 90% of its users are outside Korea, the profits from global consumption of K-pop content through subscription fees, sales of merchandise, and online ticket sales can only be expected to continue their upward trajectory.

Table 1. Kakao and NAVER's Sales of Content Services in USD Millions and as a Percentage of Total Sales From 2016 to 2020.

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
NAVER	86 (2.6%)	84.6 (2.2%)	104.82 (2.3%)	257.76 (7.1%)	383.5 (8.7%)	577.44 (10.2%)
Kakao	317.94 (26.06%)	536.2 (32.62%)	800.6 (39.75%)	908.83 (35.52%)	1177.83 (34%)	1580.42 (30.91%)

Source: Kakao (2018, 2019, 2022), NAVER (2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021b, 2022).

Table 1 shows that sales of media content segments, including K-pop products, increased five to seven times in only five years. In particular, K-pop content and related products have become the third most profitable revenue source for platform giants after online advertising and e-commerce (Kakao, 2022; NAVER, 2022). Unlike U.S.-based Alphabet and Meta, whose advertising revenues in 2021 accounted for about 81% and 97% of their total revenues, respectively, Kakao and NAVER are no longer classified as advertising platforms because the ratio of advertising revenues to their total sales has stagnated or decreased (Alphabet, 2022; Langley & Leyshon, 2017; Meta, 2022; Nooren, van Gorp, van Fijk, & Fathaigh, 2018; Srnicek, 2017). Needless to say, while breaking away from their former reliance on direct and indirect network effects generated by users and advertisers, such as through search engines or instant messengers, these platform giants increasingly arouse highly profitable network effects by providing both cultural products and the market where they are traded (Flew, 2021; Nooren et al., 2018). This results in a positive feedback loop of network effects among cultural producers, advertisers, end users, and other third-party groups that have the potential to generate enormous new revenues. Although Google's Android and Apple's iOS continue to dominate the global platform ecosystem using their in-app markets, the penetration of Korean platform companies into the recording business has disrupted the platform economy's dynamics and profoundly reshaped the K-pop business model.

Platformization of the K-Pop Industry

Infrastructural Changes in the Production of K-Pop Content

Traditionally, broadcasters had a well-established infrastructure for distributing TV content in the pre-platform era. Their K-pop music programs were the main means of consuming Korean popular music at the national level, and broadcasters almost exclusively earned revenues from K-pop through advertising. However, the reach of the traditional broadcast infrastructure was limited. Apart from selling or licensing programs to broadcasters outside Korea—a difficult undertaking—local broadcasters had no way to reach global viewership, although the Internet enabled some international K-pop fans to access material through torrent sites illegally or free of charge.

Beginning in the early 2010s, YouTube and other video-sharing platforms began to provide easily accessible channels for K-pop labels to share music videos, promotional clips, and K-pop agency-made content anywhere in the world (Jin, 2017; Ono & Kwon, 2013). As these platforms, especially YouTube, grew in popularity, traditional broadcasters and music labels naturally began producing video content to meet the growing demand. As smartphone penetration increased, "fancam" videos of live performances

recorded in portrait mode for smartphone viewing, and created and shared by fans, rapidly became one of the most popular forms of K-pop content on YouTube (Yoo, 2022), with the best clips often going “viral” globally. This phenomenon cemented the status of YouTube as the *sine qua non* for Korean cultural producers seeking a global audience.

NAVER grasped the potential of live video streaming early on and launched V LIVE using the “partnership with artists” model in 2015 (Seo, 2018, para. 4) to produce and distribute K-pop video content. For example, the “premieres” of K-pop artists had previously been mainly for the press and rarely broadcast to the public. V LIVE’s partnership strategy transformed the premieres into live-streamed “come-back shows” only available on the platform (Lee & Huh, 2021). V LIVE also began to release exclusive K-pop series, such as *Run BTS!* (Figure 1; HYBE Corporation, 2015–present), which began in 2015 and is still airing, and *EXOMENTARY LIVE* (SM Entertainment & NAVER, 2016). These and others, all live-paid content, were highly successful and brought impressive revenues (Moon, 2016). More importantly, in the long term, they played a key role in growing K-pop fandom internationally. Their success demonstrated the power of K-pop content on the global stage and V LIVE to offer a broad spectrum of formats, genres, and topics to appeal to the growing global fan base.



Figure 1. *Run BTS!* 2022 Special Episode “Fly BTS Fly” (Bowenbank, 2022).

Platform-exclusive content is a new cultural product that emerges when the interests of both platform companies and established cultural producers converge. It addresses this convergence through an infrastructural integration of cultural production that enables all stages of the circulation of cultural products to take place simultaneously within the platform. In the process, however, cultural producers become reliant on the platforms’ technological resources for production, distribution, marketing, and payment. Unlike platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, which allow users to produce and generate content to maximize their corporate profits, NAVER only allows commercial labels to create and deliver content. Thus, it can brand and market exclusive K-pop content. In other words, NAVER intentionally limits the

platform's openness at the stage of cultural production and consumption, thereby taking advantage of exclusive K-pop content under the name of VLIVE.



Figure 2. Beyond LIVE SuperM (Kwak, 2020).

Beyond LIVE (Figure 2), an online concert brand of NAVER in partnership with SM that offers online concerts and streaming services for offline concerts demonstrates the potential of innovations in platform infrastructure to influence cultural production. It aims to create a virtual space beyond its signature live-streaming service by incorporating emerging technologies, such as real-time 3D graphics and AR. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Beyond LIVE enabled an immersive K-pop experience in which new technologies became part of entertainment (Kim C. Y., 2021). SM artists who used Beyond LIVE saw notable rises in sales of tickets and merchandise, as SM Entertainment's New Year's concert "SMTOWN LIVE 2022" (SM Entertainment, 2022) through Beyond LIVE recorded about 51 million streams in 161 countries around the world (Kim, 2022). Regarding this, a survey by the Korea Creative Content Agency in 2020 reported that around 60% of those who resorted to online concerts during the pandemic said they would continue to watch them after the pandemic and hoped to see more online album premieres and fan meetings in the future (Korea Creative Content Agency, 2021).

Infrastructural Impacts on K-Pop Consumption

The success of V LIVE motivated leading K-pop agencies to create their own all-in-one platforms, accelerating the platformization of the K-pop industry. SM launched a platform, Lysn, in 2018, and HYBE quickly responded with one of its own in 2019 WeVerse, an innovative all-in-one platform that includes a private messaging service, an interactive fan "community," an in-app store, and a video platform. In a mutual investment deal between HYBE and NAVER, WeVerse merged with V LIVE in 2022 and incorporated V LIVE's live streaming features into WeVerse 2.0. The merger was an outcome of both NAVER's desire to add Korean content to its technology to compete in the global entertainment market and HYBE's interest in improving its fandom experience and developing new products using this platform giant's extensive technological

resources (Kim J. O., 2021). As a result, WeVerse became an all-in-one fandom platform integrating community, exclusive content, and e-commerce features, as well as a tool for the consumption of digital cultural products that enable audiences to enjoy albums, photos, and content using QR codes linked to the platform (Ahn, 2022).

In addition, WeVerse offers enhanced forms of interaction between fans. It enables them to communicate by posting not just texts but also photos and videos while watching artists' live-streaming content, and it adds a translation service for 15 different languages so that fans can readily communicate with a far larger number of other users (Ahn, 2022). Since 2019, revenues from WeVerse have substantially boosted HYBE's earnings, estimated that an individual user spends 105 USD per quarter on average, as of 2021 (Lee, 2021). The content sales segment, which includes sales in WeVerse Shop and concerts, grew from 65 million USD in 2019 to 308.65 million USD in 2021, accounting for 30% of the company's total sales (HYBE Corporation, 2022). Such a huge, rapid increase suggests that HYBE's reliance on platform services will only intensify in the coming years.

SM's Lysn, through its private messaging service, Bubble, is also changing how K-pop fans communicate with artists. Bubble is based on an instant chatting service but does not allow communication between users in a chat room. Compared to WeVerse, which generates profits from selling premium services to audiences instead of collecting subscription fees, Bubble offers a paid-private messaging service between artists and fans (3.99 USD per month as of 2021). Paid users can exchange messages with their favorite artists and artists and send group messages to subscribers. Fans never know how many other fans receive the same message from artists, and since the interface resembles a private chat room, they feel like they are talking to the artists personally. Artists can also share selfies and details of their daily lives that are not disclosed elsewhere (Jeon, 2021; Park, 2021). Thus, the platform creates the illusion of an intimate relationship. As of August 2021, Bubble had enrolled 1.2 million subscribers, 71% of them outside Korea—19% from mainland China, 14% from Southeast Asian countries, 12% from Japan, and 6% each from the United States and Europe—indicating a clear potential for genuinely global reach (Park, 2021).

Governing Stakeholders in Music Production Through Platforms

The success of platformization as a business model is undeniable, but it also raises serious concerns about the governance of cultural producers and users by platforms. As platform-driven infrastructural changes in the production and consumption of cultural products gain momentum, these concerns can only grow. A particular worry is that platform content will increasingly be determined by platform policies that effectively control the distribution and monetization of producer content (Poell et al., 2022), which matters to content creators and artists who need to distribute their content through platforms and attract audiences to generate profit. In 2016, when one K-pop agency tweeted that it had been denied a channel on V LIVE, NAVER responded that the agency did not meet the platform's standards in communicating with fans and did not have the requisite fan base or track record (Yoo, 2016). The exchange shows that platform companies are prepared to intervene directly in cultural governance to maintain what they see as the quality of their platforms and that such interventions can be based on a hierarchical order of producers arbitrarily determined by the platform. As the platforms' market dominance grows, K-pop agencies are likely to increasingly depend on integrated platform infrastructures for their revenues, which results in creators and

artists customizing content to satisfy what platform companies want and following their direction so that their outcomes can be released and become popular on platforms.

High-handed governance practices are also found at the user's end. Bubble, for example, limits the number of words fans can use in a message to an artist on a sliding scale according to how long each fan has subscribed. Users who have subscribed for less than 49 days are allowed only 30 words per message, which is limited to three messages in total, while those who have subscribed for more than 500 days can send up to 500 words at a time (Lysn, n.d.a). If a user cancels and later resubscribes, the limitation starts over. The policy has proved highly successful in persuading fans to continue paying for subscriptions; Bubble's subscription maintenance rate exceeds 90% (Park, 2021). There are also concerns about other user restrictions. For example, Bubble stipulates that any photos or messages artists send are its property and that users are legally liable if they use this exclusive content outside the platform (Lysn, n.d.a). It has the right to delete fan messages or posts if they are determined to be obscene, violent, malicious, or defamatory (Lysn, n.d.b). Words or expressions that Bubble's algorithms flag as violating these guidelines are censored in advance, but questions have been raised about how consistent or fair this filtering is and whether it is consistent across all the different languages the platform supports.

At an industry level, the power and reach of platform companies virtually require K-pop labels that wish to grow their sales beyond the small, saturated Korean market to continue to partner with the platforms and accept their restrictions (Choi, Yeon, & Kim, 2019). K-pop content creators, therefore, have little choice but to shape their cultural products to work well with the platform behemoths' infrastructures or seek to develop their own platforms. This revalidates that there is little change in producers' dependency on distribution channels, which has been a longstanding mechanism in cultural production in the platform era—making individual creators appropriate their content to the policies and interests of platforms (Gillespie, 2017; Morris, 2020). At the same time, the big platforms have vastly enhanced the international popularity and profitability of K-pop commodities, so it is unsurprising and advantageous that K-pop businesses are embracing platformization and transforming their products and their approach to audiences by customizing their content and products to platform requirements.

Conclusion

This study investigates the dynamics of platformization in cultural production in the Korean context by analyzing Kakao and NAVER's ongoing expansion into the K-pop business and how major K-pop labels respond. Our findings indicate that Korean platform giants regard K-pop production as a tool to generate new revenues and penetrate the global market. At the same time, K-pop labels see them as an opportunity to overcome the over-competitive and highly saturated domestic market by pioneering new markets abroad. While this seems to be a symbiotic relationship, the findings also indicate that the technological and financial advantages that Kakao and NAVER enjoy in the platformization of K-pop production bring power asymmetry between K-pop producers and threaten their creative independence.

The platformization of the K-pop industry complicates the power dynamics of cultural production in Korea. Platforms have become a key driver of K-pop's remarkable global expansion, but they have reinforced the asymmetrical power relations between platform giants and K-pop labels and creators. The

emergence of K-pop as a global brand has fostered the platformization of Korea's recording and related cultural industries. The distribution power of the platforms, which flows from their network effects, connectivity, and accessibility, is vastly superior to that of other K-pop actors. In addition, the platforms' technological resources and broader boundaries of services and networks are vital infrastructures for attracting a worldwide audience. Given that many K-pop agencies had to target both international and domestic audiences and that platforms were understood as new channels to introduce their content without much challenge, this brought K-pop agencies to rely on the live-streaming, e-commerce, messenger, and payment tools provided by platforms.

Meanwhile, platformization changes the practices of cultural production and the products themselves. Live online concerts, exclusive streaming content, and the use of metaverse and AR technologies to enhance user experience, which have become the hallmarks of K-pop worldwide, are only possible through the technological resources of platforms. However, while the resources of the platforms have expanded the forms of expression available to K-pop creators, they also require the products to be tailored to the technologies. With the growing dependence of K-pop creators on Kakao and NAVER, the two major platform companies have become increasingly dependent on the distribution, sales, and monetization of cultural products for their primary revenue streams (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2022). An important part of this revenue stream depends on the data platforms gather on users to develop merchandise and ancillary services for niche tastes and preferences (Flew, 2021; Mansell & Steinmueller, 2020; Poell et al., 2022; Srnicek, 2017; Won & Park, 2021). For instance, since V LIVE's international users are mostly Millennials and Gen Zs, NAVER has introduced LINE and webtoon services explicitly tailored to data on the interests and preferences of members of those age groups outside Asia, especially in North America and Europe, harvested through V LIVE (NAVER, 2021a). With the ongoing growth of subscriptions and purchases of exclusive K-pop content by international users, online fan meetings and concerts are no longer seen as the second-best alternatives to the offline experience, as they were perhaps largely during the pandemic (NAVER, 2021a). Thus, K-pop-related services have become a means for data-driven platforms to facilitate data harvesting for commercial use across global networks.

The interest of K-pop agencies in the global market overlaps with the need for platform giants to find new revenue sources, and this symbiosis increasingly drives the platformization of the entire K-pop cultural ecosystem. As platforms become more essential for K-pop distribution, every aspect of the cultural production of K-pop may increasingly be subordinated to the demands of tech and platform companies. In other words, the pivot of governance in the K-pop ecosystem reflects the power dynamics among stakeholders in the industry, including platform companies, K-pop labels, and users, which are often contingent upon their relationships (Prey, 2020). As the findings of our study indicate, the relationship between platform companies and K-pop labels is sometimes one-directional and subject to change depending on other factors, such as the content's quality and popularity.

In this regard, despite the aggressive expansion into cultural industries by NAVER and Kakao, the dependent status of K-pop agencies and creators in the cultural ecosystem has yet to be set in stone (Poell et al., 2022). Being platform-dependent does not necessarily mean being *platform-subordinate*. Infrastructural integration with platforms does not require the unilateral subordination of other actor groups. For example, although SM Entertainment relies on NAVER's technology, collaboration, and investment, it

still operates Lysn, which has continuously become lucrative. HYBE, for its part, maintains a mutually beneficial relationship with NAVER on a relatively equal footing to maximize its artists' economic and cultural value. Arguably, the popularity of IP owned by K-pop agencies and the ripple effects of their content are deciding factors in distinguishing between platform dependence and platform subordination.

The K-pop industry has been restructuring rapidly around platforms in conjunction with cultural producers' increasing dependence on global networks and streaming technologies for revenues. While this means that certain platform companies' influence has deepened and broadened within the industry, K-pop agencies have had to adopt digital platforms as their main vehicles for content distribution and monetization. This enables agencies to collect user data and continuously develop products better targeted to users' tastes and should make us revisit the question of power in the cultural market. Moreover, since access to audiences determines profits, cultural producers may potentially have the leverage to assert their interests against those of platform giants through their platforms.

Considering that platformization is a process of combining cultural industries and the platform industry rather than its result, it is necessary to continue to research the dynamics between cultural creators and platform companies triggered by platformization. Further research should focus on each aspect of platformization, from the tools that platforms provide for cultural producers to the new practices of cultural production and distribution and from the commodity that emerged from platformization to the power asymmetry between cultural producers and platform companies. Such empirical research will allow us to comprehensively grasp the growing symbiotic relationship between the cultural and platform industries.

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