

Impact Factors on K-pop Album Cover Design and Image Production from 1994 to 2002: The Sociopolitical and Economic Dimensions of Design Context

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Abstract

Background Building on the colloquial misunderstanding of South Korean album cover designs from 1994 to 2002 as mimicking American and Japanese visual styles, this paper examines the social, historical, economic, and technological contexts of that period. By expanding the design context to include political, economic, and technological dimensions, this research considers these factors as influential forces in the design process. The forces of globalization created a cycle of influence and export that shaped the design of this period.

Methods To identify the problem of album cover design and image productions from the period of 1994 to 2002 as imitations, historical research was conducted alongside a thorough examination of the development of the K-pop music industry during this period. The research was then organized into three distinct impact factors that influenced K-pop album cover design and image production: 1) sociopolitical and economic factors, 2) influence on and of the K-pop music industry, and 3) technological change and the impact of the digital marketplace. A cultural research approach was taken in order to connect broader factors to the process of designing album covers and creating images for the K-pop industry.

Results The results of this study create a holistic picture of the forces at work in the development of the K-pop music industry during the time period of 1994 to 2002. When considering the infrastructure of the K-pop music industry as a system of cultural production, album cover design and image production are heavily affected by the impact factors outlined in the research. The research reveals the push and pull of globalizing forces where the K-pop industry received influence from the United States and Japan, then exported its globalized image abroad to the rest of Asia.

Conclusions This research allows for a deeper understanding of album cover design and image production as integral facets of the K-pop music industry. The study explains the specific influences, particularly from African American and Japanese sources, that shaped the industry as a system, as well as the resulting designs and images of artists. The conclusive aim of this research is to expand the scholarship on K-pop to include design and image production as significant areas of research.

Keywords Album Cover Design, K-pop, Design History, Image Production

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1. Introduction

This research was conducted to unpack the colloquial misunderstanding that Korean album cover designs from the late 90's to early 2000's were mere reproductions of American and Japanese styles. In order to debunk this common dismissal towards Korean album cover design and image production, this researcher investigated the social, political, historical, economic, and technological factors that created the context within which such works were created. In order to specify the research, this paper focuses on Korean popular music (or K-pop) and sets a time frame of 1994 to 2002 (the specific parameters will be further explained in the methodology). The aim of this paper is also to expand the scholarship around K-pop discourse to include design and image production, by addressing the socio-political forces that shaped the context for design production in K-pop.

There were many influences on the K-pop industry that shaped how it became a globalized culture manufacturer (Fuhr, 2020). The specific forces that the research revealed are organized as three 'impact factors' or forces that surrounded the K-pop industry: first, the social and political context of the Korean economy and government; second, the influence of globalization on the K-pop music industry; third, the technological shift from CD's to MP3's on album production and sales (Figure 1). These factors heavily influenced the production strategies of K-pop production companies and directly affected album cover designs and other image productions including music videos and promotional imagery.

The three factors shape a deeper understanding of Korean album cover designs from the period of 1994 to 2002 as results of the processes of 'cultural hybridity' in a globalized context (Kang, 2020). They also outline how globalization shaped both the strategic and aesthetic dimensions of K-pop (Fuhr, 2016). Through such processing, one gains a more holistic answer to the citational practices evidenced in K-pop music and image production (Anderson, 2020).

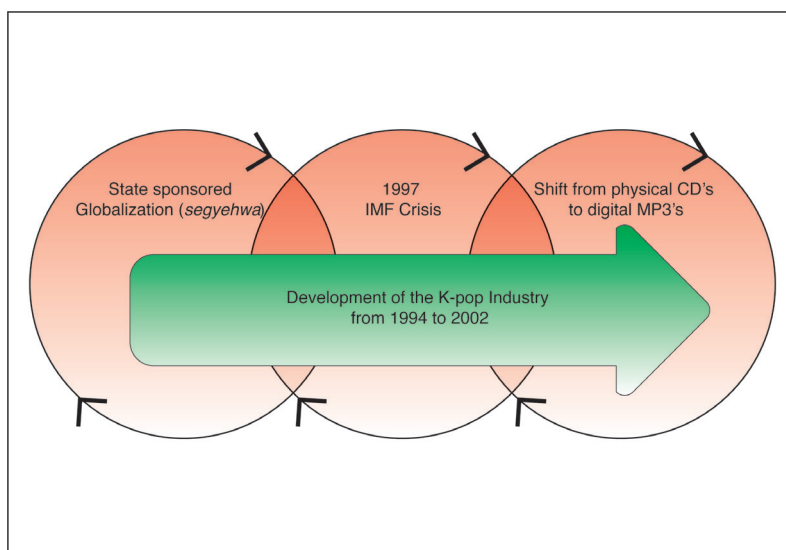


Figure 1 Impact factors that shaped the development of the K-pop Industry from 1994–2002

2. Method

For this research, the definition of 'K-pop' is borrowed from Crystal S. Anderson's definition (Anderson, 2020: p 10) "as a kind of contemporary Korean popular music that first emerged in the 1990's, has global aspirations, and features a hybridity that combines Korean and foreign music elements". The role of globalization in K-pop production must be understood through an understanding of the construction of a global imaginary, which is defined by Steger as (Steger, 2008: p 11) "a multidimensional set of processes in which images, sound bites, metaphors, myths, symbols, and spatial arrangements of globality were just as important as economic and technological dynamics".

In defining the time frame of 1994 to 2002, particular attention has been paid to the role of state, economic and technological factors during that period. These three areas can be broken down to specific events in Korean history: the state influence of President Kim Young-sam's globalization policies called *segyehwa*, the impact of the 1997 IMF Crisis, and the rapid development of the MP3 market in Korea. Although these events proceed and also continue beyond the time frame of 1994 to 2002, these dates were applied to give sharper definition to the inquiry.

The cultural research was shaped by paper research methodologies. The literature revealed several key points that connect globalizing forces with the K-pop industry and subsequently the album cover design and image production of K-pop. First, the K-pop industry was highly shaped by state and economic policies from 1994-2002. Second, the IMF Crisis of 1997 forced the K-pop industry to move toward an export-model. Third, the K-pop industry was modeled after Western strategies employed at studios such as Motwon Records (Andersson, 2020). Fourth, the technological shift from physical CD's to digital MP3 files encouraged an early adoption of by the K-pop industry of digital sales (Kang, 2020).

3. Impact Factor 1 – Sociopolitical and economic factors

3. 1. Korean globalization *segyehwa*

Korea was not exempt from the sweeping trends of globalization during the mid 1990s. Under this buzzword of "globalization" was a political agenda to create a single global market and spread consumerist values (Steger, 2008). Feeling growing pressure to compete in this global marketplace, the Kim Young-Sam government (1993-98) implemented a state-driven globalization policy, called *segyehwa* (Fuhr, 2016). With the establishment of the Globalization Promotion Committee (*segyehwa ch'ujinwiwönho*) extensive reforms were implemented across six major areas: education, legal system and economy, politics and mass media, national and local administration, environment, and culture (Fuhr, 2016). The recognition of developing domestic cultural product is of particular importance and has precedence in a key document released in 1994.

3. 2. The “Jurassic Park Factor”

In May of 1994, the Presidential Advisory Board on Science and Technology submitted a report titled ‘A Plan to Promote the Video Industry’ (*Chamdan Yeongsangsaneop Jinheung Bangan*), which created waves, not only amongst Korean political elite, but the public as well (Kang, 2020). The key point outlined in this report was a comparison of the total revenue of the Hollywood blockbuster movie Jurassic Park to the total foreign sales of 1.5 million Hyundai cars. This was shocking because Hyundai was a symbol of Korea’s economic success and a point of national pride, and caused both the Korean government and public to consider the cultural industry as a potentially powerful economic and national industry (Fuhr, 2016). This would commonly be referred to as the “Jurassic Park Factor”, a term attributed to media scholar Shim Dooboo (Shim, 2006).

As a result government initiatives were implemented and particular areas of the Korean government saw tremendous growth over the coming years. These policies were carried over from the Kim Young-sam administration (1993-1998) to the Kim Dae-Jung administration (1998-2003). By 2000, The Ministry of Culture and Tourism was expanded to include two new organizations: the Cultural Industry Promotion Center and the Game Industry Promotion Center (Fuhr, 2016). The Korean government budget for the cultural sector increased from 0.23 percent in 1980 to 1.24 percent in 2001, with a particularly sharp increase of 495 percent from 1998 to 1999 (Yim, 2003). We can see a sweeping trend to grow Korean domestic cultural product and accrue soft power from the cultural industry (Kang, 2020).

3. 3. The 1997 IMF Crisis

However, there was also a tremendous disrupting event that exposed Korea as a victim of globalization. This disruption would be the 1997 IMF Crisis. In summary, the push to globalize caused many Korean conglomerates, or *chaebol* to take on an unseen amount of short term debt and investment. However, they did not see the promised returns or growth and also were crippled by corruption. The resulting domino effect saw the Korean stock market plunge rapidly by late November 1997. By the close of 1997 a USD 58 billion bailout package was secured (Coe and Kim, 2002). This came with many conditions for restructuring and the easing of foreign investment. It was a devastating time in recent Korean history.

There was a stark rise in suicides and the country saw a cavalcade of bankruptcies from 17,200 cases in 1997 to an additional 17,000 from January to May 1998. The national income also sharply declined from USD 10,000 per person in 1995 to USD 6,400-6,700 in 1998, a number unseen since 1991 (Kang, 2020). However, the 1997 IMF crisis would have an ironically positive effect on the K-pop industry. By witnessing the shortcomings of the domestic Korean market, the K-pop industry would respond with an export-driven strategy.

4. Impact Factor 2 – Influences on and of the K-pop music industry

4. 1. The impact of the IMF crisis on K-pop

By the time the IMF crisis hit Korea in 1997 the K-pop industry had already been making moves for global export. This section will outline both the strategic and aesthetic qualities

of K-pop production that will help encourage entry to a global stage. The shift from a narrowly focused industry on the domestic market to an international market would be carried out largely by independent actors. The cultural industry saw investment from *chaebol* conglomerates in other sectors such as the film and TV industry, but the IMF crisis prevented these companies from entering the popular music arena. Most importantly, the IMF crisis was a paradigm shift for the K-pop music industry, forcing them to adopt an attitude of “going out to live” (*bakkeuro nagaya sanda*) (Kang, 2020).

One particular company was poised to act upon this quickly, SM Entertainment.

Founded in 1989 by Lee Soo-man, SM Entertainment is largely responsible for the success of K-pop’s contemporary format of systematic production and training of idol groups. SM’s influence is pervasive both from strategic industry practices to aesthetic characteristics of music and performance production (Anderson, 2020). SM really started to make waves in the late 90’s with three years of successful debut groups: the five member boy group H.O.T. in 1996, the three member girl group SES in 1997, and the six-member boy group Shinhwa in 1998. These back-to-back-to-back successes allowed SM to export H.O.T. to the Chinese market in 1998, where they would see 50,000 album sales in just one month! (Kang 2020). In many ways, Lee Soo-man fulfilled the cultural ambition of the Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung administrations’ push for cultural export. In a 2011 interview he is quoted as saying “What I set forth was the idea of ‘culture first, economy next.’ I believe if the culture of a country becomes known to foreign people first then the economy of that country would thrive through those people” (“Korean Entertainment Agency Takes Its Acts Globally”, 2011). But what characteristics of K-pop made it ready for such export?

4. 2. K-pop influences: American and Japanese clones

The aesthetic qualities of K-pop and *hallyu* are often described in terms of ‘cultural hybridity’, ‘appropriation’ and ‘citation’ (Kang, 2020; Anderson 2020). But from which cultures is K-pop drawing from? Howard cites (Howard, 2002: p 80) the “seismic shift in musical production” as coming from the arrival of hip hop in South Korea. And Anderson emphasizes (Anderson, 2020: p XVIII) that K-pop reflects the influence of “distinct African American performance aesthetics, choreography, styling and other visuals”.

These influences traveled into Korea over the years after the 1988 Seoul Olympics and through a series of opening policies allowing more import of foreign culture (Shim, 2006). Prior and during this transition we see a generation who grew up consuming American culture (Fuhr, 2016). From this we can conclude that the producers of K-pop in the late 90s, who were born in the 1980s, had grown up under such circumstances. A primary actor in directly bringing American black music styles into the K-pop industry was Seo Taiji and Boys, who were tremendously successful during their activity from 1992-1996 (Fuhr, 2016).

The enormous influence of Japanese culture on K-pop production must also be noted, both musical and visual. In specific regards to Japanese influences, Korea began lifting the ban on Japanese cultural products in 1998 (MCT, 2000). Ironically, this had an adverse effect on the K-pop industry because it had become common practice for K-pop musicians to mimic Japanese musicians, and in many instances outright copy their songs (Kang, 2020). By the early 2000s Korean listeners, who now had access to Japanese popular music, could cite the source material coming from Japan.

4. 3. Controversial adaptations of American and Japanese influences

From within these conditions we see several examples of the direct influence of American and Japanese culture on the image production of K-pop. One of the most notable examples of album cover design similarity is the album cover of H.O.T.'s first album, *We Hate All Kinds of Violence*, released in September 1996. The album cover features a distraught teen sitting on steps with their head in their knees (Figure 2, top left). The image looks strikingly similar to American punk band Rancid's 1995 release *...And Out Come the Wolves* (Dosirak, 2007) (Figure 2, top right).



Figure 2 Controversial K-pop album cover designs

From the examples in <Figure 2> a clear observation can be made that K-pop album covers went through a process of absorbing reference materials from America and Japan (Korean albums left, American and Japanese sources, right). Whether or not these are cases of parody or mimicry is up for debate, but we see a clear cycle of influence. Fuhr explains this cycles like this (Fuhr, 2016: p 9): “the West sells, the rest receives. In this sense, the history of Korean popular music in reflecting Korea’s path to modernity is largely a history of reception — be that appropriation, domestication, hybridization, transculturation, or whatever term one likes to adopt.”

4. 4. Holistic production in the K-pop industry including image production

Within the K-pop system, the album cover is just one output of an overall strategy to create a comprehensive image, much like the strategy of Motown music producer Berry Gordy. Gordy's holistic vision for Motown meant creating an image of his artists that would appeal to a wider range of audiences, namely white listeners in the US market (Anderson, 2020). K-pop's adoption of such models, namely by agencies like SM, indicate an emphasis on the role of creating an artist image for wider adoption. In the case of K-pop, this meant creating a globalized image influenced by American and Japanese styles ready for export to the wider Asia market. Such processes can attribute for such likenesses in album cover design (see Figure 2).

The adoption of African American production styles can also be seen in music videos (Anderson, 2020). The early 2000s saw the rise of more hip-hop driven groups, such as Jinusean and Uptown, amongst others. Also, at this point the former member of Seotaiji and Boys, Yang Hyun-suk, had gone on to create his own production company, YG, which had a decidedly hip-hop driven image both in sound and visuals. In Jinusean's *Familienium* music video use of a fisheye lens, flashy suits, guns and money fuse the popular imagery of American hip hop artists. This looks like a clearly cited styling when placed next to the Hype Williams directed music video, *Feel So Good* for the American hip hop artist Ma\$e (Figure 3). This high contrast, flashy and fisheye lens style was very popular at the time, and fit very appropriately for the YG produced and hip hop positioned group, Jinusean.



Figure 3 still from Jinusean's 1999 music video (left) and still from Ma\$e's 1997 music video (right).

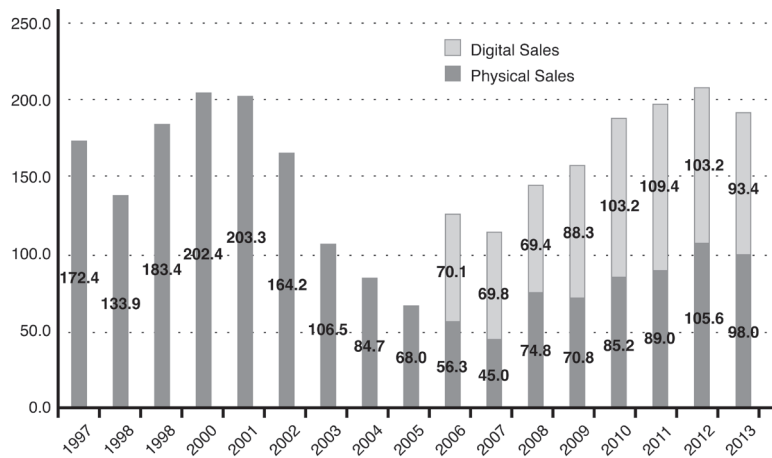
5. Impact Factor 3 – Technological change and the impact of the digital marketplace

5. 1. New distribution channels: Cable TV, STAR TV, and the internet

It is important to note the production of music videos because by 2002 the energies that flowed into album cover design would need to be shifted elsewhere. Music videos and the shift from CDs to MP3s would open new channels for distribution of K-pop content. Three major distribution channels would influence the decline of the album cover and a stronger emphasis on music video and broadcast performance.

Cable television came to Korea on March 1, 1995 with two channels dedicated to musical broadcast, KM and Mnet, and they would be integral to the 'idol system' (Kang, 2020). In addition, the formation of the Rupert Murdoch owned STAR TV (satellite television Asian region TV) in 1991 would become a fruitful distribution network for K-pop's growing exportation to the rest of Asia (Kang, 2020). Then in 2000 the Korean music sharing site

Soribada was created. By 2003, digital music sales would surpass physical album sales with a record digital sales of 1.85 billion won compared to 1.833 billion won in physical sales (Kang, 2020). Although digital sales would continue to parallel physical sales for several more years, by 2006 they would start to dramatically surpass the physical album market (Figure 4).



Unit: 1 million USD. Digital sales included from 2006. Sources: IFPI, 2010 and IFPI, 2014.

Figure 4 South Korea's music market size from 1997 to 2013

5. 2. Peer-to-Peer networking brings down the music industry

2002 is noted as the pivotal year of change for album cover design in this research for one reason, peer-to-peer networking. In 2002, Soribada launched Soribada2, which was a peer-to-peer network. This meant that Soribada's servers no longer hosted the digital music, and the files were shared from user-to-user (Beverly Yang, B., & Garcia-Molina, H., 2003). This created a massive headache for the music industry, because they had to then take legal action with individual consumers. The creation of Soribada and Soribada2 are also significant because during this stage the service remained free, it would become a paid service in 2004 with the introduction of Soribada3. This virtually destroyed the Korean music market overnight forcing them to relinquish up to 70% of their sales to distributors and associated businesses (Kang, 2020).

In analysis of the shift from CD's to MP3's we again return to the impact of the 1997 IMF crisis. Korea was actually quite fast in adopting digital music distribution, (it would take the US market until 2011 for the digital market to surpass physical sales). One of the major factors that contributed to this "early adoption" was the government push to grow the IT infrastructure and establish Korea as a center for technological innovation (Kim, 2018). As Lie puts it (Lie, 2012: p 353) the result was a quick reckoning of "what digitized music and music video, which in turn could be disseminated with relatively low cost, did was to generate a condition of possibility of reaching a mass audience outside of national borders without a massive investment". Again, we see the outsized influence of globalization at work on K-pop production.

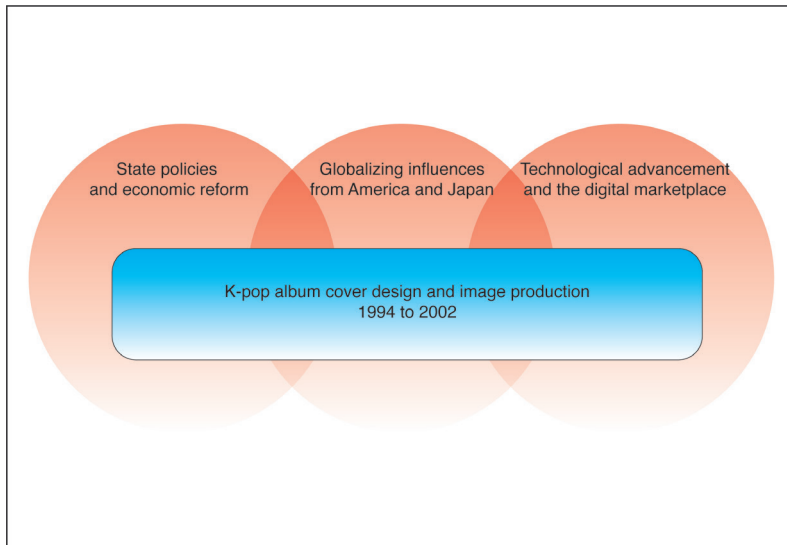


Figure 5 The impact factors on K-pop album cover design and image production.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the influence of state forces, economic crisis, and technological shifts shaped the context within which K-pop album covers and image production were made. What is observed is a cycle of influence: one flowing into Korea that would influence the aesthetics of K-pop, and one flowing out of Korea to export a globalized cultural image. All the while, government initiatives to bring Korea out of crisis saw heavy investment in Culture content (*munhwak'ont'ench'ū*) and CT (*munhwagisul*), the latter was heavily adopted by the SM Entertainment CEO Lee Soon Man (Fuhr, 2020; MCT 2005; Park 2001; Lee, 2011). Alongside such reform and progress was the aggressive construction of a robust IT infrastructure and economy, which would bring an ironic demise to the music industry. The technological shift from CD's to MP3's would affect the global music industry, however as evidenced in Figure 4, Korea would bounce back relatively quickly due to its early adoption of digital music sales. All these impact factors surrounded and shaped the design process of album cover design and image production from 1994 to 2002 and eventually beyond (Figure 5).

Anderson cites (Anderson, 2020: p 75) numerous comparisons between the K-pop industry and the Motown system of Berry Gordy, “who constructed not only the musical performance of his artists, but also their image for the reception by a wider audience”. Aligning such comparisons to the global cultural export industry that K-pop music has become, emphasizes how crucial image production is in creating the K-pop product. Therefore, during the time period outlined in this research, 1994 to 2002, such factors cannot be ignored and should be considered when examining the development of album cover design and image production.

This research is being further expanded by on going research. Investigations into the K-pop industry and the design processes involved are to be supplemented by a series of interviews with practionerers, both on the production and design ends of the industry, from that time period. Additionally, a more careful analysis of album cover designs before 1994 and after

2002 is to be conducted for a deeper understanding of the design and aesthetic motivations behind K-pop music culture. The research, hopefully, will yield answers about the role design has played throughout the development of the K-pop music industry.

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