6 Embodying K-Pop Hits through Cover Dance Practices

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Before COVID-19, in large urban centers around the world, it was not unusual to spot a group of dancers re-creating the choreography showcased in live performances and music videos of K-pop. This eye-catching fan practice demonstrates the popularity of K-pop to the public who encounter dancers inside and outside shopping centers, in school playgrounds, in parking lots, and in public parks. Why is dance such a large part of K-pop, and of fan engagement with the music? What has motivated the participants? Where did the dance emphasis in international K-pop come from?

Live performances and music videos of K-pop are visually compelling in large part because of an emphasis on precise synchronized dance. Dance has become so essential to the performance of K-pop that certain groups and solo performers perform dance live while lip-synching to the music, in order to please the audience with perfect choreography unmarred by breathy vocal delivery.[1] This emphasis on dance is not new. In the *gogo* clubs of the 1970s and the nightclubs of the 1980s and onward, people listened to live music while dancing. Koreans also foregrounded dance in the way they spoke about pop music. From the late 1980s, before terms like *keipap* (K-pop) and *aidolpap* (idol pop), Koreans commonly divided popular music into two main types: *balladeu* (slow songs of love and heartbreak) and *daenseu eumak* (songs with a strong beat meant to dance to).[2] By the late 1980s, it was common for top artists to include a dance company performing behind them when they sang on Korean live television shows. Some singers participated in the dancing, like the undeniable darling of the time period, Wanseon Kim. In their 1992 debut, Seo Taiji and Boys, widely lauded as the first K-pop group,[3] incorporated choreographed hip hop–influenced dance moves into their performances, and such moves have since become the industry standard. As the years have passed, the dances performed by K-pop groups have become more prominent, and their precision, speed, and difficulty have increased.

For a country of 51 million, Korea has a surprisingly large amount of dance-focused activity, including societies to study dance, dance journals, university dance departments, dance performances, and festivals. International ballet companies have been recruiting Korean ballerinas for

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decades, and modern dance companies from Korea travel the world. Perhaps most important for elevating the quality of K-pop dance, however, was the explosion of hip-hop dance, or b-boy dance, that swept Korea in the early 2000s. Many Korean dance teams have won prestigious international dance competitions, including Gamblerz Crew, T.I.P. Crew, Rivers Crew, Jinjo Crew, and Morning of Owl. Individual Korean b-boys have also won top awards on the international competitive circuit. At the same time that K-pop has grown in Korea, a new era of dancers and dance-related businesses has emerged. The infamous after-school cram schools called *hagwon* now include studios teaching dance. Many crews and individual dancers run such dance studios, appear in advertisements, perform, and are contracted to develop choreography for K-pop stars.[4] Some of the more financially flush Korean *gihoeksa* (entertainment agencies) also contract with foreign choreographers to bring in new ideas.

All of this – the strong dance culture in Korea, the rise of Korean b-boys, and the incorporation of foreign choreographers – has shaped the type of dance shown in K-pop music videos and performances. How, then, did the dances of K-pop idol stars come to be transferred onto the bodies of K-pop audiences around the world? K-pop has a demonstrated ability to forge an affective transnational community; its hyper-emphasis on beauty, fashion, and self-presentation has made it ideal for sharing with large and diverse communities through visually rich social media platforms, and K-pop cover dance in particular allows participants to experiment with gender expression. Although passive, private fandom exists; participation through sharing content and reproducing the music is at the core of music fandom. Music videos are shared because of their visual elements – superior production quality, fabulous choreography, beautiful stars, and trending fashions. While performing the songs may be difficult because only a small population of non-Koreans possess the necessary language skills, international fan audiences often dance along. Although cover dance practices originated years earlier, PSY's "Gangnam Style" was particularly important in demonstrating to the world how much fun dancing along could be. With its relatively simple moves, it also convinced many that dance training was not a requirement for participation in the world of K-pop. Cover dance is a deeper engagement than simply listening to the music, and this vibrant participatory culture also plays a role in exposing new audiences to K-pop, as dancers practice in public spaces; perform at school talent shows, Korea-related events, and dance contests; and upload videos of their efforts.

This chapter provides an overview of the cover dance phenomenon, answering the following questions: What is cover dance, and who are the dancers? Why do they dance? What benefits do they find in cover dance?

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Do they want to be stars? Cover dance is a confluence of dance practice, identity practice, and fan practice. As dance, it serves as a form of artistic expression, exercise, and self-care; as an identity practice, it allows dancers to embody something new – making room for play with gender and sexuality and even dreams of stardom. As a fan practice, it provides a way to come together with other fans to bond around beloved stars. Because cover dance can fulfill so many purposes, participation is robust and enthusiastic. Since 2010 – when I uploaded an online survey and conducted follow-up email interviews on K-pop dance – I have watched countless videos uploaded to YouTube and actively followed cover dance teams and solo dancers, some of whom are no longer active. I have attended classes on K-pop dance, learned K-pop choreography myself, and judged a cover dance competition on behalf of the Korean Consulate in Vancouver in 2017. In this chapter, observations from those experiences are supplemented by targeted interviews with cover dance contestants and over three dozen interviews with cover dancers conducted in person or via email between 2015 and 2021. Interviewees are identified by first name only or by a pseudonym, according to their preference.

What Is Cover Dance and Who Are the Dancers?

K-pop cover dance involves dancing to the infectious beats of popular K-pop songs, but beyond that, the variation is considerable – there is neither a right nor a wrong way to "do" cover dance. It can be either a faithful re-creation or a simplification (frequently), an improvement (arguably), or a reimagination of the official choreography. The context also varies: Cover dancers may dance alone, in a class (for fun, for exercise, with or without dreams of stardom), or as members of a club (open to members of the same school or community). The dancing may be observed in the form of a live performance or in a video made for upload. If a video is recorded, it can be done with advanced editing, lighting, and costuming or have minimal or no special effects; it may even be recorded as a single take. The participants can come from any ethnic or national background. Although the relatively recent popularity of K-pop fandom and the athletic moves mean that most cover dancers are relatively young, some are older. Dancers may have a decade of dance training encompassing ballet, modern, hip hop, tap, or a wide variety of other styles, or they may never have danced before.

Previous publications on K-pop cover dance address specific groups of cover dancers. Kai Khiun Liew (2013) focuses on the live rehearsals and performances of cover dancers in Singapore; Dredge Byung'chu Kang

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(2018, 2014) examines cover dance in Thai subcultures; Chuyun Oh (2020) looks at YouTube uploads by cover dancers in Denmark; Sang-yeon Sung addresses K-pop participatory fan activities, such as cover dance, in Europe (2013); and I examined the participants in a government-sponsored contest in Korea (2020). Such contexts are highly visible, as dancers may be observed by nonparticipants in outdoor public spaces, on YouTube, and on television. But cover dance is not always executed to be viewed by others. For some, cover dance is an experience of doing, not being seen to do. Meanwhile, medical researchers in Korea have investigated the therapeutic effect of cover dance participation on troubled youth (Seo et al. 2015), and Hyeonju Im published a paper for the World Taekwondo Headquarters on combining K-pop cover dance and taekwondo in physical education classrooms (2019). In contrast to these more focused works, this chapter broadly characterizes and situates cover dance as an intercultural global participatory fan activity.

Most cover dancers are K-pop fans, but not all of them are. Some are interested in group dancing, friendship, or exercise – and they fall into K-pop fandom through exposure to the music via dance practice. Even if a cover dancer only dances, without recording and uploading, they learn, through embodying the same moves as the K-pop performers, to understand the art they see in a performance or music video on a deeper level. Apollo, an American university student, was introduced to K-pop by a friend. "I then went home and immediately searched back up the videos, and then YouTube decided to recommend me a TON of K-pop. After crying from these beautiful videos, I saw a random dance play video and discovered that fans dance, too. I was so excited [that] I immediately tried to dance myself."[5] Anyone who can watch a music video can begin to learn the dance moves, particularly with the help of tutorial videos, or by slowing the playback (a browser extension called MirrorTube allows users to mirror their screen and increase the speed of play 5 percent at a time). Cover dance does not have the same mystique or gatekeeping that surrounds many other dance forms. Jennifer, a working professional software developer, reminded me that idols are known to practice for many hours per day over several years before debuting: "The belief is that if you dedicate enough time and effort, you'll become good at something, such as dancing."[6] For Jennifer this meant that she, too, could eventually become a good dancer if she put in the time. For her, the idea that it was about effort, not natural talent, was liberating.

Table 6.1 shows some figures related to the production and popularity of fifteen cover dance YouTube channels that I have been tracking. All have a significant number of videos – enough output to be analytically interesting. The YouTube channels were created between 2008 (Sandy &

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Table 6.1 *Examples of well-known cover groups (as of November 25, 2020)*

Cover group (country), date YouTube account opened	Subscribers	Total videos	Most viewed video	View count
Awesome Haeun (Korea), July 2014	4.95 million	435	2018 Melon Awards Best Dance Nominees	50.7 million
B-Wild (Vietnam), January 2017	688,000	218	BTS, "Boy with Luv"	8.5 million
East2West (Canada), November 2010	1.56 million	850	BTS, "Fake Love"	9.2 million
Haru Dance (USA), March 2012	876,000	316	BLACKPINK, "Forever Young"	6.8 million
Hive Dance Crew (France), August 2016	483,000	77	Momoland, "Boom Boom"	1.8 million
K-Boy Team (Thailand), May 2017	864,000	58	Momoland, "Boom Boom"	0.94 million
K-Tigers (Korea), December 2011	1.39 million	409	BTS, "Blood, Sweat, and Tears"	15 million
Kaotsun's Cover Dance Crew (KCDC) (Australia), January 2012	145,000	447	TWICE, "What Is Love?"	7.2 million
Kueendom & Kingsman (Malaysia), January 2012	511,000	157	GD x Taeyang, "Good Boy"	3.9 million
Risin' Crew (France), January 2015	474,000	281	BTS, "Go Go"	8.1 million
Sandy & Mandy (Taiwan), July 2008	1.25 million	231	Momoland, "Boom Boom"	5.1 million
St 319 Entertainment (Vietnam), January 2011	1.63 million	212	Aimee x B Ray, "Anh nha o dao the"*	110 million
Trainees Company (Venezuela), September 2013	39.2000	137	BTS, "On"	0.31 million
Waveya (Korea), January 2011	3.72 m	661	PSY, "Gangnam Style"	177 million
Yours Truly (Canada), September 2013	105 k	1,543	BTS, "Mic Drop"	2.3 million

* Original song, not a cover.

Mandy) and 2017 (B-Wild from Vietnam and K-Boy from Thailand). Each channel stands out – these are dominant cover groups in terms of geographic region, international contests, and channel popularity (by view count and by subscriber count). Interviewees in this chapter are associated with or discussing many of these channels. The channels range from having nearly five million subscribers (Awesome Haeun) to only 39,200 in the case of Trainees Company from Venezuela. K-Boy from Thailand has the fewest uploads – only 58 – while Yours Truly from Canada has the most, with over 1,500 videos on YouTube. Popular covers elicit a significant number of views, with popular channels able to secure viewing numbers comparable to original song releases by some idol groups. In comparison I offer the view count on four idol K-pop music videos released in November and December 2018.[7] EXO, a top K-pop group, has had 352 million views for "Love Shot." GOT7, a well-known K-pop group, released a mellow holiday ballad, "Miracle," that has had 40 million views. UP10TION has had 3.2 million views on "Blue Rose," and Lovelyz,

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who debuted in 2014, has had 3.5 million views with "Chaja gaseyo" from their fifth EP. Eleven of the fifteen YouTube channels I am tracking have at least one video with more views than the songs by UP10TION and Lovelyz, and three even had more than the track by GOT7. One of the highly successful channels is East2West, Montreal's premier cover group. It was founded by three friends who were part of a school club in 2009, just at the start of *Hallyu* (the international spread of Korean popular culture) popularity in Montreal. After graduating, they wanted to continue dancing, so they founded a group that evolved and grew, originally concentrating on live performance. Eventually they decided to make a YouTube channel and upload covers to share dancing with more people.

Why Do They Dance?

The formation of communities through fandom is not new or unique to K-pop.[8] Within K-pop, however, fandom cover dance provides an offline immersive experience that builds particularly strong community bonds. Consider the stories of Liliane, Miska, and Stephanie. Liliane has been a K-pop fan since 2006. She started dance classes while in high school in Taiwan and later enrolled in a K-pop dance class. When she entered university in Vancouver, Canada, she became active with a campus dance club, K-Wave, and danced with them for four years. Liliane explained the commitment, outlining how she would go to class all week, spend time with family on Saturday, wake up early on Sunday and go to church, then head directly to campus to practice for three hours. "It is something I like doing, but you have to invest time and effort. It was very mentally tiring on top of schoolwork."[9] As a member of K-Wave and a club executive, she participated regularly, week after week; there was no off season.

After graduation she joined a local club, Black Core, and this allowed her to continue to enjoy cover dance as an exercise activity with friends, but without the obligation to be part of every production. Instead, she could step in whenever there was a perception that her strengths matched a planned cover. Liliane explained, "K-Wave was very performance based, but with Black Core it is about getting together to film."[10] Like Liliane, many dancers participate in cover dancing casually, coming together with a group of other people who enjoy K-pop. In a follow-up email, Liliane articulated the type of friendship that drew her first to K-Wave and then to Black Core:

> The sort of connection you build with your fellow dancers (not like a group that started as a group of close friends) is kind of different from the type of connections you build with your close non-dancer friends. It almost feels like

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> you're coworkers in the sense that you have the same type of "expertise" or "professional jargon" when you communicate with each other and know what you're talking about with the whole insider type of talk.[11]

For her, leaving K-Wave meant losing this specific type of friendship that she had enjoyed for half a decade. Dancing with Black Core, then, was a natural next step. Many people stop dancing when they leave a school with a cover dance team not because they no longer enjoy K-pop or dancing, but because they are no longer interested in dancing without their community.

In early 2019, I interviewed Miska, a member of the Canadian group East2West, after she had returned from a performance at the finals of the Changwon K-Pop Cover Dance Festival. Miska had started listening to K-pop in 2008; a few years later, a friend took her to an East2West performance: "While they were performing, they were so united. I thought, 'Wow, this is so amazing, I'd love to be part of this,' and then after the show they announced when auditions were going to be held and I tried out and made it in."[12] In other words, it was the perception of community that attracted her to join the group, which had had a profound impact on her life. In 2019 she was already in her fifth year dancing with East2West, during which time the group had grown from fewer than 100,000 to more than a million YouTube subscribers. Miska felt proud of her role in this growth – to me, it seemed that the group and Miska had grown to maturity together. East2West has performed at Toronto and New York K-CON events and opened for two K-pop soloists: Hyuna in Montreal and Heize in Toronto. (After my interview with Miska, East2West was also invited to K-CON in Los Angeles.) Despite their success, and similar to other groups, East2West has no dedicated practice space and mostly relies on outdoor spaces for practice.

East2West illustrates the difficulty in converting cover dance to a career, or even having cover dancing support itself. Despite their impressive number of followers, East2West was to some degree funded by the members. They could earn more money if they uploaded videos that were not covers: Since covers use official audio, these videos are automatically monetized to the benefit of the idol artists. Their performance opportunities have not been a source of money either. When they went to K-CON in New York in 2017, they paid for their own transportation and lodging, receiving passes and tickets to some idol concerts in return; Miska wondered if a smaller group might have received more from K-CON. They have made some branded gear that they sell online and at events, and sometimes a video is sponsored by a company, such as the IZ*ONE "Violeta" cover.[13] After winning more than 1 million subscribers, they quit performing for free, but the funds they receive are used mainly to rent studio space to practice for shows.

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Although Miska has no particular drive toward stardom, East2West has served her life in other ways. She credited East2West with helping her choose her major (communications) and giving her practical work experience (as part of the company's management team). She has her own YouTube channel and is active on other media (such as TikTok and Instagram). From her content, it is clear that cover dance has been part of her journey not just as a dancer but as a media creator who is increasingly comfortable in front of the camera. It has also brought her community – Miska described East2West's core values as those "of a family, a family that has a strong bond, and that makes us different than other groups and made us what we are today – relying on each other without external support."[14] East2West's performance at the K-Pop World Festival meant a free trip to Korea. A month after we talked, Miska began a semester as an exchange student at Kyunghee University in Seoul.

Many participants experience cover dance as a place of personal liberation. The dance scholar Chuyun Oh applied Edward W. Soja's idea of "thirdspace" to Danish women who used their cover dance practice to find a place where they felt liberated and could become themselves.[15] In many of my interviews, I heard echoes of this. K-pop cover dance seems to create an egalitarian space where dancers can come together and share their love of K-pop and of dance. Many live in regions where K-pop fandom may draw negative attention from classmates and coworkers. Through time spent practicing K-pop choreography with other fans, these dancers can find belonging and appreciation of shared interests that they otherwise might only have experienced online. Seeking connection and togetherness, they are finding it in Korean music and its associated fan culture. Stephanie, a cover dancer from Vancouver, explained what it was like to meet other friends who liked K-pop and join a cover dance group:

> This was possibly the first time I had felt like I found friends who had the same interests as me. I was able to talk about the things I was interested in with people that actually knew what I was talking about. In my opinion, the strongest thing about the cover dance community is that it's where people are able to express who they are and what they love.[16]

The K-pop fan communities in disparate locations around the globe are strengthened through active engagement with the music. As Liliane explained it:

> It's a very team-based activity. It becomes like a team sport, [with a] sense of team work. If I had to do solo covers I wouldn't enjoy it half as much. I would rather perform with multiple people than try to make my own name and perform on my own. We all want to make it look good.[17]

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Figure 6.1 Miska (standing) with East2West performing BTS's "Not Today." The East2West cover has had more than 6 million views since March 2017. Still from www.youtube.com/watch?v=xu9rd7NsRmU (accessed November 25, 2020).

When groups come together to dance, they also support each other in other ways. In North America, many K-pop cover groups in cities like Vancouver with a large Asian population are the children of Asian immigrants or are immigrants themselves. K-pop provides them an alternative vision for their lives and support to resist a family-approved path. Stephanie, who recently returned from two post-university years in Korea, explained that for her, K-pop demonstrated that Asians could "be more than just doctors, lawyers, engineers, or whatever."[18] She remembered being nine and pivoting from saying that she would become a dentist to planning to become a dancer like BoA or TVXQ. In a follow-up email, Miska (see Figure 6.1) told me that cover dance "seems more welcoming because the idols that we 'copy' and that we look up to are Koreans, people of Asian descent, people who look like us. It's the Asian representativity that made us believe that we can do it too: be cool, be cute or be sexy!"[19] She remarked, "There's just a feeling of pure joy finding a place where you belong with a group of people who love and support you for who you are."[20] It is this intense feeling of community that has kept all three women involved in K-pop cover dance.

What Benefits Are Found in Cover Dance?

Sam from Venezuela is a fan of K-pop and a promoter of Korea-related activities, including cover dance, in Latin America. In his words,

> Most K-pop fans in our region come from middle-low to low income backgrounds, where multiple hardships are part of their everyday life. In such a scenario, [the] internet becomes their first source of entertaining; because

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> K-pop is a digital phenomenon it's not rare that they encounter it sooner or later, through a video, meme, etc. K-pop aesthetic does a beautiful contrast with their daily life surroundings, while the diversity of idol masculinities becomes a point of empathy for LGBTQ+ males who feel somewhere in the world other men are living their masculinity the way we want to live it.[21]

Sam was not the only interviewee to mention both the inspiring beauty of the K-pop product and the space held within K-pop for fans to *perceive* gender expressions that might not be possible in their own country. On the one hand, K-pop cover dance, as a dance practice, is becoming more socially acceptable. From the perspective of Aydan, a young woman from the Brazilian cover group Opulence, men cover K-pop because the popular performers are also men. She noted that many choose to cover songs with a more "masculine" or "bad boy" concept. She also attributed male participation to simple popularity: "K-pop is way more popular nowadays and manages to get the attention of all sorts of people."[22] Lola, another Opulence member, remarked that the sexuality of men "isn't put on trial at all times" in K-pop cover dance, in contrast to ballet.[23] Fans may use the heteronormativity enacted by the male idols within an industry and society that creates a strong bifurcation between male and female as permission to engage in dance and a foil against any local implications that dance is not appropriate for men. In fact, K-pop cover dance sees substantial participation by men, and some teams are made up only of men.

Although a few outliers in the industry (such as Aquinas, Mrshll, and Holland) have proclaimed they are not heterosexual, the vast majority of K-pop idols maintain the cis-gender heterosexual norm, while fans celebrate gender and sexual inclusion. Some international viewers fixate on the relative freedom in gender expressions on stage, declaring K-pop queer-friendly. Anthropologist Dredge Byung'chu Kang has tracked how the LGBTQ+ population has long embraced K-pop cover dance practices in Thailand, where it is a social activity most commonly enjoyed in "gay dance clubs throughout Bangkok where patrons join in when their favorite K-pop songs are played."[24] In Korean gay clubs, there is a 2 a.m. K-pop dance break, where approximately five K-pop songs are played and the clubgoers perform the choreography from the videos. Stars also participate in crafting a queer-friendly reading for K-pop, for instance, performing "fan service," such as cuddling between two members of a group, which can at times encourage a gay fantasy interpretation of the celebrity text.[25] Idol stars are aware of their support from the LGBTQ+ population, and many idols have made statements supporting LGBTQ+ people in contexts ranging from fan meetings to BTS's first address to the United Nations. Collectively this has meant that men involved in K-pop fan spaces find greater latitude in self-expression.

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Jostin, from Venezuela's Trainees Company, explained, "K-pop provides something that modern dance or ballet does not, freedom to not be judged for not being masculine in the way society wants."[26] Nini Destroy, a drag queen from Argentina who performs the dances of K-pop girl groups in drag, characterized the cover dance community as "inclusive of the queer community."[27] Nini Destroy and other international cover dancers may also have been emboldened by the cross-dressing of idol stars (on variety programs): "K-pop cross-dressing is a symbolic mask that allows the performance of queer identities, while at the same time shielding its performers from being perceived as queer."[28] If male idols can dress up and do girl group dances, why shouldn't fans do so as well? Whether an individual's dance practices are related to gender or sexuality or not, fans are empowered by the meanings they are creating from the media products and performed identity of the idols (see Figure 6.2).[29]

Krish, from the Philippines, explained the role of what she termed "reverse cover groups," or groups of female-presenting dancers who perform the dances of boy groups and especially groups of male-presenting dancers who perform the dances of girl groups. "To me, it seems as though most of the dancers I know that are in reverse cover groups use cover dancing as a way for them to express their gender identity, especially for biologically male dancers."[30] Even Korean cover dancers, such as those in Josh Kim's short documentary *Purple Night*, have found expressive freedom through learning reverse covers.[31] The young men Kim interviewed came to a regular K-pop dance class to learn girl group dances with other young men. The goal of their practice was

Figure 6.2 Hive Dance Crew (France) performing TWICE's "More and More." Still from www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Z3hO9_eVQA (accessed January 8, 2021).

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not to dance in a competition or upload their dancing to YouTube; instead, it seemed related to enjoyment of the process and the community of like-minded individuals. In the documentary, the instructor, Gangmin, explains that when he began teaching, there were a lot of working women in his class, but nowadays a number of men are also attending. One of the students explains that the lyrics in girl group songs are more relatable, and another talks about learning to ignore those who might judge such an activity. The documentary implicitly emphasizes the importance of community – any of these men could learn by following along with YouTube at home, but group affirmation that learning the dances can bring happiness is clearly one reason they attend the class. The interviewee Minsuk explains, "My dream, like in dance class, is to always be honest with myself and express what I want. I want to live according to who I am and enjoy life like dance."[32] It seems clear that in covering girl groups, these young men find an acceptable way to express femininity while living in a culture that continues to pressure them to conform to a heterosexual norm.

A benefit to cover dance for non-Korean participants is the way it facilitates learning about Korea. Apollo, a senior majoring in East Asian Studies who has 63,000 followers on his K-pop cover dance TikTok account,[33] emailed me, "Before I became a K-pop dancer, I knew nothing about Korea or dancing," indicating just how important cover dance has been to his life trajectory.[34] From ordinary fan-level knowledge such as the names of groups and impressive dancers within the K-pop scene to comments about learning the language, past and future trips to Korea, and enrollment in Korea and East Asia–related coursework, it was clear that for my interviewees, cover dancing was not just about dancing. It was a factor (often a decisive or initiating factor) in learning about Korea more generally, and this process of learning serves the goals of the *gihoeksa*.

First, many fans learn about topics related to popular media. As Krish explained, "Cover group members' interest in Korea is primarily influenced by their consumption of K-pop/drama . . . cover dancing serves as an avenue for cover group members to know more about selected aspects of Korea and relevant related industries such as beauty, fashion, and the like."[35] Liliane has visited Korea four times, with family and with friends. In the case of Hina, from Mexico, her family started to show interest in Korea and made plans to travel there because "I get up early each Saturday to rehearse, save up money and even get a job to buy my [dance] wardrobe, and currently I'm guiding my professional life toward being a dance cover teacher and classical arts or dance major."[36] Opulence's founder, Bells, wrote, "Cover dance opens the door to deeply studying Korean culture. You start because the songs are catchy, then one thing leads to another

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and when you least expect you're learning to speak Korean. Well done, Korea!"[37]

Film scholar Michelle Cho has pointed out that Korean celebrities are constantly negotiating self-presentation for both an international and a national audience.[38] In the same way, international fans of K-pop are constantly negotiating their non-Korean identity vis-à-vis their consciousness of K-pop as a Korean product. Each dancer, who may or may not have begun as a K-pop fan (some may have been looking for dance opportunities and come to fandom of specific artists later through exposure), conceptualizes their fandom as an act of engaging with Korean culture. Just as *doing things* with others (compared to doing something more passive, like watching movies or eating at a restaurant) involves a more active process of memory making and the release of more endorphins; the time young people spend together struggling to perfect choreography can produce vivid memories and tightly bonded communities. For foreign cover dancers, these experiences are interwoven with an awareness of K-pop as representative of Korea and Korean culture. Their dance practice conditions them to associate positive experiences with Korea.

Second, even the shallowest engagement inadvertently teaches the participant something beyond dance about Korea, Korean culture, and language. Many cover dancers agree that details such as lip-synching and appropriate facial expressions are as important as memorizing choreography. Eventually many cover dancers learn some Korean. Cover dancing often becomes inextricably linked to promoting K-pop and Korea more broadly. Cover dancers who practice or film themselves in public places demonstrate to local audiences the attractions of K-pop in a way that promotes a vision of grassroots popularity and musical vitality associated with Korea. The dancers become what I term "borrowed national bodies,"[39] enacting a love of Korea and extending the reach of Korean cultural products to new audiences. Because they seem to have no stake in Korean success, local audiences may find them more convincing than a slick, Korean government-funded project. After visiting Korea to perform in the Changwon World K-Pop Festival, Lindsay, from South Africa, was convinced that Korea was part of his future. His subsequent dance and performance-related activities in South Africa were designed to help him return.[40] This level of passion based on direct experience is infectious.

Do Cover Dancers Want to Be Stars?

Cover dancers who share their dance online learn a great deal about social media, such as YouTube, TikTok, and other platforms, and about

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videography and editing. They learn that YouTube channels are paid by Google AdSense, which tracks the views of advertisements that play before and sometimes during a YouTube video. To be monetized, a channel has to apply for monetization and have enough subscribers to qualify, but because funds are calculated based on thousands of views, a channel is not lucrative unless a large number of its monetizable videos gain a significant audience. Under YouTube's monetization policies, the view count and funds earned are assigned to the copyright holder. For example, Momoland receives all the benefits for the views of covers of their hit "Boom Boom."

In order to earn money from their YouTube channels and become part of the "K-pop adjacent industries," cover dancers have to appeal to their audience with content that does not include the copyrighted songs.[41] For example, Yours Truly uploads reactions; Awesome Haeun, a child model, shows clips of her life beyond K-pop dance; Sandy and Mandy appear as advertising spokesmodels; St 319 produces original music in Vietnamese; and Waveya directs fans to a subscription-based service, Member Me, for spicier cover dances. Other channels make no special effort to earn funds from cover dance or the popularity they have accrued, but demonstrate their commitment to teaching and performing (such as Kaotsun's Cover Dance Crew). Almost all the cover dance groups in Table 6.1 are popular enough to be considered secondary stars – in the area where they live, they may have multiple invitations to perform per year. Is that enough for them, or do they want something more?

There are a few stories of K-pop idols today who were once dancers, such as Kenta (JBJ95), who, before his *Produce 101* fostered stardom, was a well-known cover dancer in Japan with groups that were so successful that they released albums, sold merchandise, and collected ticket fees for their performances.[42] Soloist AleXa, Ashley Choi of Ladies Code, Dongpyo of X1, and Gowon of LOONA were also cover dancers before becoming idols.[43] In addition, most idols learn other artists' choreography as part of a training process, because choreography is "the foundation for performance for K-pop 'idol' artists."[44] Career arcs like those of Kenta, AleXa, Ashley, Dongpyo, and Gowon fuel the dreams of dancers everywhere, feeding a fantasy that one's cover dance practice could lead to greatness.

Interviewees from the Americas, although they expressed occasional wistful thoughts about the odds that people from their circle would become idols, seem to have entertained no real expectation that cover dance could be a stepping-stone to becoming an idol. For them it seemed that "success" in covering was connected to things like unique experiences and perhaps just enough income to offset costs. They aspired to have the type of audience commanded by the groups in Table 6.1, not the audience of an idol. Winning a contest and getting an all-expenses-paid trip to

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Korea, as had happened for three of my interviewees, was most cover dancers' top goal.

Cover dance provides dancers an outlet for the side of themselves that longs for a stage. It can be a fulfilling hobby and even a major part of their lives, but it becomes harder to sustain after they enter the regular workforce. Out of the countless cover dance participants worldwide, only a select few keep dancing for more than a decade. A small fraction of participants move on to teach dance classes for profit or to join performance companies. Several interviewees mentioned that people stop covering when their life priorities change as they age – as they get a serious job and become busy. For example, in a follow-up interview conducted by email, Liliane explained that her participation in cover dance has been waning, following a string of small injuries, and was dampened by the social distancing restrictions of the pandemic in 2020.[45] Others move away from strictly dancing, like Jimin from Korea, who shifted to making videos of cover dancers and other performers to hone those skills, and began producing K-pop–related television programs.[46] Still others, like St 319 in Vietnam or K-Tigers in Korea, form their own companies and release original songs and videos. As participants age and their cohort of fellow dancers thins, participation drops off.

Melo characterized Singapore, where she lives, as having few opportunities for dance professionals: "Having been in this community for a long time, we have definitely seen so many of our friends pursue their dreams of becoming trainees and idols along the way. Some of them who have achieved some sort of acknowledgement include Tasha and Ferlyn from former Singapore-Korea girl group, SKarF, as well as Alfred Sng[47] who is currently still pursuing his aspirations to become an artist through programs in China."[48] Melo herself had landed paid performance opportunities, been invited to Korea to perform, and taught K-pop dance in one of Singapore's most recognized dance studios – which had a direct relationship with major Korean companies. However, now in her late twenties, she had also moved back into teaching dance part time, as neither she nor her parents saw it as a viable long-term career plan.

In Korea – where multiple dance studios have direct relationships with *gihoeksa* and are able to directly place their learners in auditions, or train dancers and place them in the same room with an artist – the situation is different. Paige is twenty-five and American. An avid dancer, she attends a *chwimi ban* (hobbyist class) in K-pop dance at a dance studio somewhat near her home in Seoul. Her class is not an *odisyeon ban* (audition preparatory class), but regular attendance twice a week for more than a year has allowed her to observe a range of other cover dancers and get to know some of her fellow students. Paige's experience is fairly typical for Korea – the difference

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between her and would-be auditioners is very clear, as she explained: "When a new song comes out at 6 pm one day, [audition students] will be already doing the choreography to that new track when I go in to dance at 8:30 pm."[49]

Several interviewees mentioned frustration with outside critiques of cover dance, which may be driven by an understanding that other forms of dance training are needed for professionals. Melo felt that many people leave cover dancing to move on to what she considered a more serious engagement with dance – she specifically mentioned popping, locking, and other forms of b-boy/b-girl dance.[50] Dancers with serious professional aspirations usually acquire additional skills, often through attending classes in other types of dance. For example, the studio where Paige practices, Reality 7, also offers classes in jazz, hip hop, and urban dance. However, those with dreams of stardom may do better to choose another studio.

1Million, one of Seoul's top studios, is closely associated with both K-pop and professional dance careers. Many, if not all, of its staff teachers have choreographed or performed as back-up dancers for idol stars. Major Korean stars like Jay Park, Uhm Junghwa, MFBTY, and Mamamoo have filmed themselves dancing in the 1Million studio, if the choreographer and backup dancers are from 1Million. 1Million also offers daily dance lessons at all levels and has become a destination for K-pop fans visiting Korea. In 2019 I visited, wading through fans who lined the stairwell waiting to sign up for a single lesson with the help of a receptionist who spoke by turns in Korean, English, Japanese, and Chinese. Stephanie, who regularly practiced at 1Million on the weekends while living in Korea, explained, "In my experience, 1Million is the place where if you're striving to become a prominent dancer in the entertainment world, you're at the right place if you're willing to put in the effort."[51] It is possible to become an idol or a professional dancer starting from cover dance, as in the case of the idols mentioned earlier, and entering the Korean professional sector is easier for young Koreans who begin training as tweens or teens. Living in Korea, a K-pop fan may have an opportunity to become a backup dancer or a "foreign dancing body" – a visibly non-Korean extra or even a love interest – in a music video,[52] but there are few opportunities to become an idol and many obstacles along the way.

How Do K-Pop Companies and the Korean Government Encourage Cover Dance?

Dancing to K-pop drives up social media statistics, YouTube-linked advertisements, and the power of K-pop videos as a site of embedded product placement – *gihoeksa* participate in encouraging cover dance not to

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facilitate learning about Korea but to achieve their bottom line. The view count on the dance practice videos by K-pop idols demonstrates how often they are watched. Although a fan may enjoy watching for a glimpse of a backstage moment, dancers watch such videos repeatedly, often mirrored, as they memorize the moves. Later, cover dancers may upload their own version of the dance, and by doing so, they further boost the popularity of the original song, choreography, and artist. Essentially, cover dance practices create a feedback loop that helps augment perceptions of song popularity. In addition, as already mentioned, each cover is copyrighted material of the original K-pop artists; therefore, the *gihoeksa* profit equally from YouTube views of music videos, dance practices, and covers.

To encourage participation and active engagement, K-pop groups and companies have taken to creating viral challenges, including the specific recording of "K-pop in public." Cover dance groups know that if they advance to the finals of a contest, there is a good chance the group they are covering will see them dance. K-Boy, a cover team from Thailand, participated in a contest for "Cherry Bomb," a song by NCT 127. Since they were one of the top three teams (East2West was another) in the contest, NCT 127 members filmed their reaction to the cover.[53] "K-Boy then uploaded a video to YouTube of their reaction to the reaction.[54] Later that year K-Boy was invited to Korea to perform the song at the *Seoul Music Awards*."[55] In another instance, IZ*ONE filmed their reactions to the top three teams in a cover contest of their song "Violeta"; East2West appears again, as well as B-Wild, a team from Vietnam that is also listed in Table 6.1.[56]

The Korean government invests deeply in projects that support and encourage cover dance, such as the annual Changwon World K-Pop Festival, which is actively supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (since 2011), and the K-Pop Cover Dance Festival (since 2010), supported by the city of Seoul and the newspaper *Seoul Sinmun*. Similar opportunities for K-pop cover dancers to compete for a chance to perform in Korea, and maybe even meet their idols, are developed through partnerships between television stations, entertainment agencies, and regions seeking to boost local tourism. As Stephanie explained, for most cover dancers, "their main goal is that ticket to Korea. Cover dances, TikTok challenges, official government sponsored competitions. At the end of the day, fans just hope to get the attention of their favourite idols and to get their few minutes of fame."[57] A large amount of cover activity can be generated from even a single challenge like the "Cherry Bomb" and "Violeta" contests mentioned above, and each challenge is accompanied by more views of YouTube videos. Collectively those views and covers, per YouTube logistics and fan interest in metrics, increase earnings for the idols (and their *gihoeksa*) and the perception of the popularity of the idols and their songs.

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Conclusion

Too often scholars dismiss these uploads to social media as sycophantic noise, an act of homage to the stars themselves. This assumption is not without a basis in reality – many K-pop cover groups only re-create choreography of the stars. Yet K-pop cover dance is so much more. Cover dancers, at least the successful ones, are watched – and the goal of their many uploads, as shown in Table 6.1, is to be watched. As they offer their participation in the K-pop space, they bring new ideas, challenges, and creativity to K-pop, adding juice and spice to an industry that needs to stay on its toes or risk losing its edge.

By moving their bodies together to the infectious beats of K-pop, these cover dancers share their passion and create tightly bonded communities that sustain them emotionally, even (and perhaps particularly) if they are also resisting societal or familial expectations. K-pop fandom is a seed that, if nurtured, can change the fans' expected life trajectory, leading them to new classes, new majors, new linguistic abilities, a new travel destination, or even a new home. The connection between Korean celebrities and diverse dance lovers from around the world seems to be a remaking of a cultural pole, the creation of a new set of aspirations. No longer constantly looking to America as the origin of cultural trends, cover dance demonstrates that K-pop permeates not just the headphones but also the muscles, tendons, and ligaments of young people around the world.

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