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K-POP TO THE STARS: THE EXPORT OF KOREAN POP MUSIC AS AN ANALOG FOR
EMBEDDED CULTURAL ARTIFACTS IN MESSAGES TO EXTRATERRESTRIAL INTELLIGENCE

Abstract

Korean pop music, better known as K-Pop, has taken the world's cultural industries by storm as part of Hallyu or the so-called "Korean wave". The global success of K-Pop can be explained in large part by its development as a "cultural technology," a concept coined in the late 90s by the Korean computer scientist Kwangyun Wohn and popularized by Lee Soo-man, the founder of the largest music label in Korea, S.M. Entertainment. As a cultural technology, Korean pop music is developed in a highly controlled manner and optimized for transmission to foreign audiences. In many instances, this involves a composition strategy that involves studying local music trends and incorporating these features into the music of a K-Pop group so that the music sounds "local" when it is presented to that foreign audience. This primes foreign audiences to be receptive to K-Pop music, even if local musical sensibilities are much different than in Korea. This tension between culture, which connotes something that arises organically from a community, and technology, which implies control and design, is also found in every message for extraterrestrial intelligence that has been broadcast into the cosmos to date. In this paper I argue that the concept of cultural technology as used by the Korean cultural industry is a useful lens through which to analyze cultural artifacts embedded in interstellar messages. Furthermore, I critically analyze the cultural content of recent interstellar messages through the lens of cultural technology and demonstrate how this analysis can guide the design of future interstellar messages. Given that it is impossible to know in advance how to tailor the cultural artifacts of an interstellar message so they seem familiar to an extraterrestrial recipient, the value of using the concept of cultural technology as an analytical framework mostly resides in the selection of artifacts for transmission and how these artifacts are presented to an extraterrestrial recipient.