GLOBAL RACIAL SOLIDARITY? (K-)POPULARIZATION, CHANGES, AND ERASURE IN TRANSNATIONAL MOVEMENTS OF #STOPASIANHATE

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Introduction and Research Questions

Amidst the growing anti-Asian hate sentiment since the beginning of the pandemic, six Asian women were shot to death at three spas in Atlanta, United States, on March 16, 2021. As Asian American scholars and critics rightfully noted, the violence against female Asian workers was multi-layered: it was a gendered and racialized violence predicated on racial stereotypes that have rendered Asian women as both sexual objects and secondary citizens in the U.S.

While the #StopAsianHate (hereafter #SAH) movement began as a response to the gendered and structural racism against Asians, it took another turn as global K-pop fans —most notably fans of BTS—adopted the hashtag to address racism against K-pop stars. The transnational journey of #StopAsianHate is an intriguing lens that allows us to imagine the alternative to the common Western-centric perspectives, reversing the West-to-non-West framework, since it originated in the U.S. and was adopted by global K-pop fans outside the U.S. context. #SAH also appeared to call for and suggest possibilities of global racial solidarity. However, how has K-pop influenced #SAH in a way that reshapes the discourse against the structural marginalization and gendered violence against Asians? What changes or gets lost in the transnational movement of online racial justice hashtags? With these questions, this paper aims to examine the ruptures created by the global and transnational movement of racial justice activism, particularly as it travels and is mediated through hashtags, critically reflecting the potential and limitation of global uses of #SAH.

Imaginaries of Global K-Pop Solidarity

K-pop fans' political engagement received the spotlight through events such as the BTS fandom ARMY's co-optation of Trump's 2020 Tulsa rally and their support of Black

Lives Matter in the U.S. (Park et al., 2021; Kim & Kim, 2023). Building on this new horizon of K-pop as a mode of politics and K-pop fandom as a political community, scholars have broadened the scope of K-pop politics to a global, transnational scale. For instance, scholars suggest that as a culture emerging from the "periphery," K-pop connects fans at the periphery (J. O. Kim, 2021), through which fans can form "minority solidarity" (Choi & Maliangkay, 2014) across national, cultural, and linguistic borders. Indeed, global K-pop fans' engagement with the #SAH and how they used the hashtag years after the shooting suggests how resistance against Asian Hate can be sustained from and by the "periphery." Existing studies have thus shed a positive light on the possibility of transnational and transcultural expansions of solidarity via K-pop (McLaren & Jin, 2020), particularly against Asian Hate and violence against Asians. However, such simplified celebratory views overlook how historical, local, and structural systems of oppression might be erased under the impetus of "global K-pop" solidarity. Instead, this paper calls for a critical perspective that questions the imaginaries of global racial solidarity, affectively created and connected by K-pop, by looking at how K-pop changes the focus and the central discourses of #SAH. Taking K-pop as a starting point, this perspective allows us to more broadly examine what "transnationalism" and "globalism" entail for online activism, and how the marginalized voices and experiences get erased throughout the process.

The Study

We collected all tweets (including user metadata such as user bio, timestamp, and tweet language) posted from March 16, 2021 to December 31, 2022 containing "#StopAsianHate." To focus on "global" K-pop fans' engagement with the hashtag, we focused on the non-English subset (1,932,114 tweets, 542,961 users), using Twitter's language detector. To show how discourses and topics related to #SAH shifted, we adopted the user clustering and topic modeling method (all-MiniLM-L6-v2 model from Sentence-BERT (Reimers & Gurevych, 2019) to cluster the user bios and tweets into semantically coherent topics. Based on the user clustering method, we were able to identify global K-pop fans. Then, taking a qualitative approach, we examined the clustered topics multiple times for in-depth reading of the topics. We also conducted a critical discourse analysis of the tweets, examining the fans' discursive tactics in which Asian Hate resistance was expressed.

Main Findings

We show that global K-pop fans' engagement with the #SAH created a shift in topics of the racial justice movement and discursive tactics. First, we found new emerging hashtags that specifically connected #SAH with K-pop, such as #apologizetobts, suggesting how K-pop fans adopted the hashtag. Across the span of a year since the Atlanta Shooting, we found a shift in the topic of the movement from anti-Asian hate crimes in the U.S. to problematizing microaggressions in mainstream culture and media events. For instance, we found emerging hashtags used along with #SAH, such as #racistbillboard and #racistgrammyawards, which criticized racist jokes or racist media events. These hashtags were used along with #SAH as fans criticized racist remarks against BTS at the Billboard Music Awards or Grammy Awards. Other hashtags, such

as #apologizetobts, made a more explicit connection between #SAH and K-pop, redirecting the focus to BTS as the target of Asian Hate.

Secondly, taking a closer look at how discursive tactics for racial justice advocacy changed, we examined the ways in which global fans addressed Asian Hate and showed support. Whereas the initial language revolved around anger against the killing of Asian women and violence, we found new affective languages that signal love toward K-pop stars, thereby allowing global fans to show support. Such tactics included using BTS song lyrics, quoting from BTS members, or inserting purple heart emojis to show solidarity with #SAH. While some tweets showed strong emotions of anger and problematized everyday racism against Asians (e.g., "Racism is not a fucking joke"), these were often used alongside comments or hashtags supporting BTS.

Discussion and Conclusion

Existing literature has shown how popular and playful culture can lower the barriers to participating in social justice activism (Abidin, 2020). In the case of #SAH as a racial justice movement, K-pop has significantly contributed to this, lowering global fans who are outside the imminent Asian American network and communities, to participate. Despite the positive impact of K-pop's influence on #SAH, we demonstrate how discourses problematizing the structural, systematic, and institutionalized violence of anti-Asian racism shifted to addressing media controversies against K-pop stars, through the process in which what we call "(K-)popularization" of #SAH. And amidst this process of (K-)popularization, we focused on the shifts, changes, and erasures.

Based on our findings, new hashtags like #racismisnotcomedy or #racsimisnotajoke emerged to problematize everyday forms of racism and expand the scope of Asian Hate. While this shift may expand #SAH discourse to problematizing the everyday racism level, such as racist slurs and microaggression, I argue that it erases the complex and embodied histories, experiences, and narratives of racial violence against everyday Asians (Chen & Wu, 2021), particularly against Asian females. Moreover, proactive hashtags like #apologizetobts make us question who deserves to receive apologies, whether it is limiting the recognized victims to influential male stars like BTS. Whereas #SAH was born to address the precarity of Asian females subject to complicated layers of racialization, sexualization, and marginalization, K-pop alters the #SAH's focus to male K-pop stars and hyper-media events. The K-popularization of #SAH asks whether global racial solidarity is an imagination inseparable from glamourous media celebrities or can be achieved through acknowledging the pain of the most precarious subjects.

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