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Building Communities Beyond Borders: The Translingual Practices of Transnational Fans of Korean Pop Culture

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Abstract

This paper utilizes a translingual framework to analyze forum posts on online message boards dedicated to discussing Korean pop culture. As Korean entertainment gains worldwide appeal, more and more international fans seek communities where they can share their thoughts with the rest of the world unimpeded by borders of language and culture. The goal of this analysis is to identify how translingual practices are used and incorporated by transnational users when composing this genre, strengthening their connection with each other no matter their physical location.

Translingualism is an approach in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics that seeks to dismantle monolingualist and multilingualism myths that languages “contaminate” each other in interaction and that bilingual and multilingual users need to switch between languages to keep each one “pure” (Wei 14). According to Horner et al. in “Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach,” the translingual approach “sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome (...), but as a resource for producing meaning” (303). It also honors the power of all language users to “shape language to specific ends,” recognizes the heterogeneity of “all users of language” globally, and, finally, directly confronts monolingualist expectations of a standard language (305). Furthermore, translingualism recognizes the multimodal aspects of writing, functioning as a bridge between languages, genres, modes, and rhetorical studies (Gonzales). It also understands that language is acquired through socialization (Sánchez-Martín 37) and that all individuals, even those who speak only one “language,” have “a

unique linguistic repertoire that keeps developing and changing” depending on the social and cultural context they find themselves in (38). One such context that offers plenty of examples of translingual practices is the online world.

Due to the expansion and accessibility of the internet, physical distances between discourse communities have been disappearing, with an increasing number of users interacting “with other multilinguals or monolinguals” drawing on their linguistic repertoires “in complex, dynamic, and creative ways” that are both multimodal and multilingual (Kulavuz-Onal and Vásquez 241). Multimodal communication is the “meshing of semiotic resources” such as “symbols, gestures, color, body language, pitch, intonation etc.” (Milu), with five recognized modes: written, visual, aural, spatial, and gestural. Videos, voice messages, pictures, animations, and interactive and reactive user interfaces are a few examples of modes mixed with the written word regularly seen on the internet. With easy access to a large amount of multimedia tools at their fingertips, online users are no longer limited to an alphabetic writing expression.

In her study “Multimodality, Translingualism, and Rhetorical Genre Studies,” Laura Gonzales argues that “any study that claims to use translingualism as a framework must provide a particular definition to be used in context of the data presented” in response the lack of clarification present in discussions about the subject. So, for the purposes of this analysis, translingualism contains the following major components: embracing language fluidity and changeability, accepting multiple modes and linguistic variations in meaning-making, and acknowledging contact zones as well as cultural and social heterogeneous influences on users of all languages. This recognition of constant transformation and cross-cultural interaction in the building and practice of language is at the core of translingualism.

Adopting these principles, a translingual framework can be utilized to analyze forum posts on online message boards, specifically posts dedicated to the discussion of Korean pop culture made on the following online forums: Soompi, Popjustice, and Kpopsource. The goal of the analysis is to identify how multiple languages and modes of communication are used and incorporated by users when composing this genre, demonstrating the translingual tenets described previously.

Many message boards discussing Korean pop culture have been created over the last decade following the “Hallyu wave,” a surge of growth of South Korean pop culture in prominence and popularity across the globe (Romano). Embracing international social media companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, the Korean music, television, and film industries have transcended language and gained worldwide appeal. For example, in 2012, the music video for Psy’s “Gangnam Style” reached over three billion views, demonstrating that “you could be big and not sing entirely in English or be in vogue” (“How did

K-Pop conquer the world?”). With Korean culture finding an international audience, worldwide fans of Korean music (K-Pop) and watchers of Korean television series (K-Dramas) needed a place to discuss their enthusiasm. It was out of this need that Soompi, Popjustice, and K-popsource were created. These communities are united by their love of Korean pop culture and have no borders of nationality or geography, with members from Asia, North America, Latin America, and Europe. Although the subject of fan appreciation is Asian, there is no guarantee or expectation that only Asian or Asian Americans are participating on these forums. In fact, Soompi, for example, has “a dedicated user base from 150 different countries,” and was founded with the “goal of providing a place where [the founder] and her American friends could share their love for H.O.T. and their counterparts” (“About Soompi”). Meanwhile Popjustice began in 2000 with the goal of being “a place to celebrate pop,” but also a place for “honesty,” and now has over 18,000 members and almost eight million posts have been sent so far (Robinson). Kpopsource, however, was created in 2018 by the user Ryujin in response to the “online toxicity in kpop communities” and for “users who love [a] friendly environment” (“Our Mission, Story & Goals”).

Genre Conventions of Each Community

According to John Swales in his book *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*, genre consists of rules and “various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content, and intended audience” representing communicative events created by members of a discourse community for a common purpose (58). As such, posts created within these communities have to follow certain genre conventions, and these rules vary between message boards. A post in Soompi differs from ones written in Popjustice and Kpopsource, for example. Although there are common expectations (mainly, the subject matter must be related to Korean pop culture, with some exceptions) and common tools are offered by the message boards (profile pictures, the function to like or react to a post, and the organization of posts via threads, for example), the goals of each community have affected which posts are allowed and encouraged and which ones are suppressed and deleted. Thus, the translingual practices of the posts within these communities vary.

All three message boards have strict policies against hate speech and discriminatory content, harassment and bullying, disinformation and rumors, sexually explicit content, and copyright infringement (Admin; Robinson; Ryujin, “KPopSource Forum Rules”). However, and notably, their rules differ on swearing, addition of images and media along with text, and on the use of multiple languages/dialects. While Soompi is clear that “All forms of swearing are forbidden” (Admin), Kpopsource says that “swearing in moderation is allowed, however, swears may not be used at a person, institution or organization of any

kind” (Ryujin, “KPopSource Forum Rules”). Finally, Popjustice allows the user to swear freely: “There’s no need to censor or asterisk out your swear words!” (Robinson). Already, this signals different priorities, but it is the rules on image, media, and multiple languages usage that provide the most relevant information for this analysis.

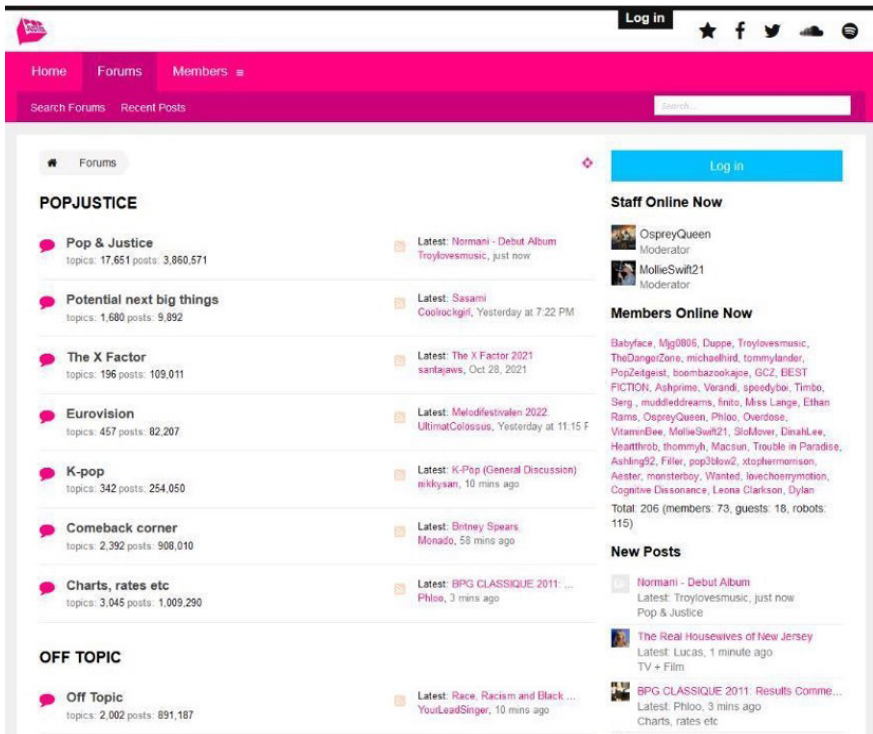


Fig. 1. Screenshot from Popjustice’s main page.

Despite allowing swearing, Popjustice warns its users that posts not written “in fully formed English sentences” might be deleted, and its rules don’t allow “textspeak or webspeak,” abbreviations, emojis, and “post[s] [that] amounts to little or no more than an image AND YES THIS INCLUDES REACTION GIFS” (Robinson). This is a stark contrast from the attitudes taken by Soompi and Kpopsources.

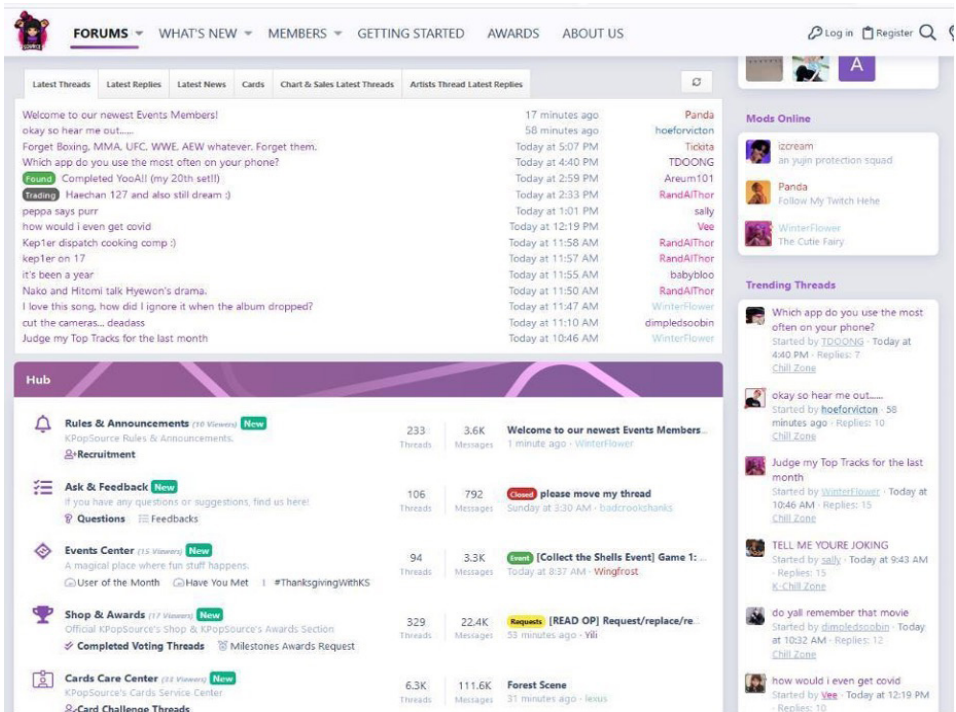


Fig. 2. Screenshot from Kpopsource's main page.

Kpopsource does note that the official language of the forum is English because that ensures “all users [can] participate in conversations and [it] helps moderators supervise the forum,” but reassures its users that “not everyone is fluent in English” and that the forum is “a community where users help each other, so do not be afraid to make a mistake” (Ryujin, “KPopSource Forum Rules”). Finally, Kpopsource allows for posts in languages other than English, but tells members not to create isolated threads where only one language is used. They also encourage “common expressions such as “c’est la vie,” “de gustibus non est disputandum,” and other majorly used phrases” (Ryujin, “KPopSource Forum Rules”). On the usage of images, Kpopsource asks that users not post “overly flashy animation or irksome graphics” that might cause physical discomfort in others.

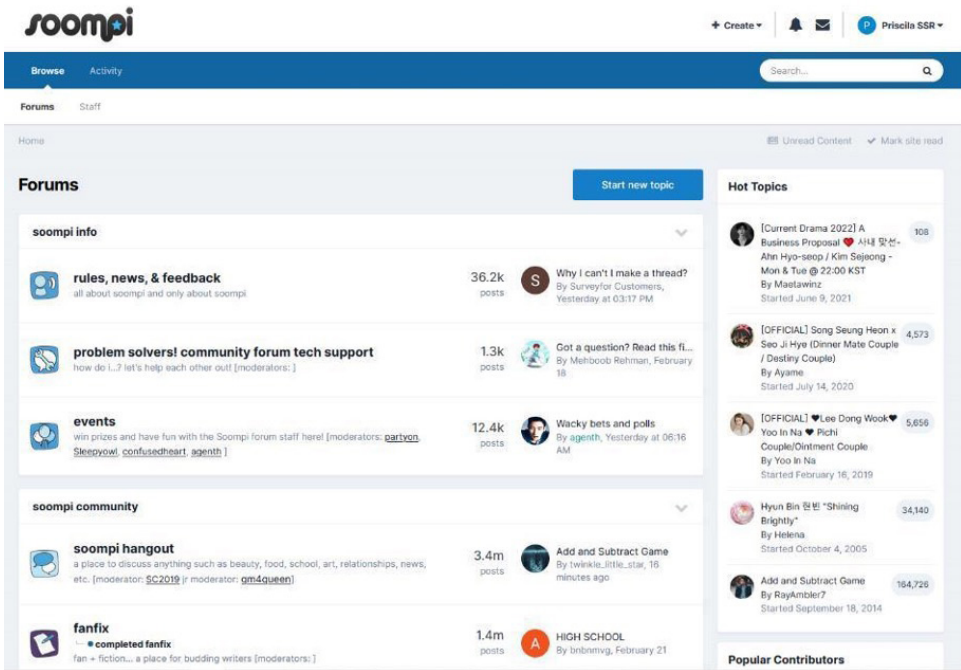


Fig. 3. Screenshot from Soompi's main page.

Of all three, Soompi is far less strict on these particular subjects, asking users to merely take into consideration the bandwidth usage of multiple images in a post and to provide English translations if they chose to write in a foreign language (Admin). It is within the context of these rules three posts from each message board will be analyzed to identify linguistic resources and multiple modes used in their composition.

The Translingual Practices Within Each Community

Soompi

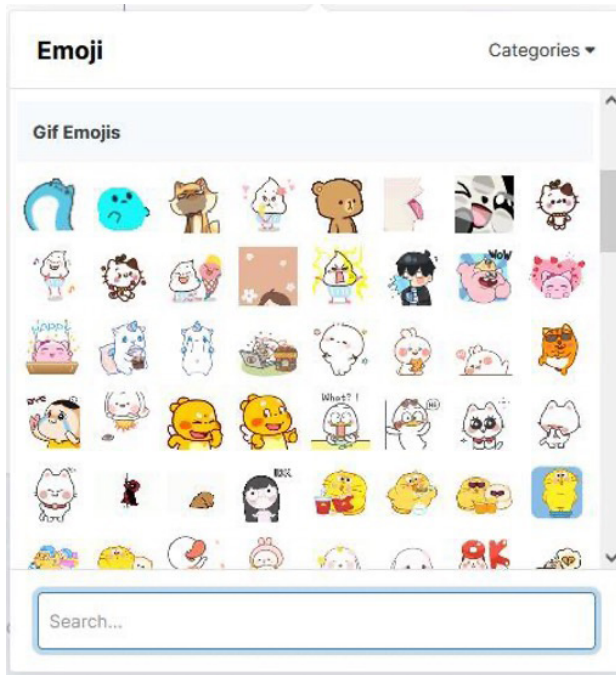


Fig. 4. List of available emojis for Soompi users.

As part of one of the most popular message boards for Korean pop culture enthusiasts, Soompi's members showcase a particular and recurring style when creating their posts. Because they all have access to a unique list of emojis made available by the board (Fig. 4.), users will often rely on these community-specific images to express emotions their writing can't capture. These emojis are animated cartoons of cute animals, such as bunnies, cats, pigs, bears, and hamsters, which express a variety of emotions and are made using an art style commonly associated with Asian artists. Users often mesh the written mode with the visual mode by including emojis in sentences, reflecting the translingual component of accepting multiple modes and linguistic variations in meaning-making.

In the post written by gm4queen, the meshing of modes can be seen as the poster substitutes the word "Hi" with the emoji of a bunny waving with a speech bubble and explains their meaning when using the expression "Poor me..." by adding a laughing cat emoji (Fig. 5). Furthermore, the post also demonstrates the use of the spatial mode. Because this is an online environment, gm4queen can "shorten" the "distance" between them and the user Sleepy Owl by tagging them ("@Sleepy Owl"). Tagging notifies the tagged user that they are being addressed, in a similar way that waving at someone or pointing at them would signal a desire to communicate directly with a person.

Convergence Rhetoric

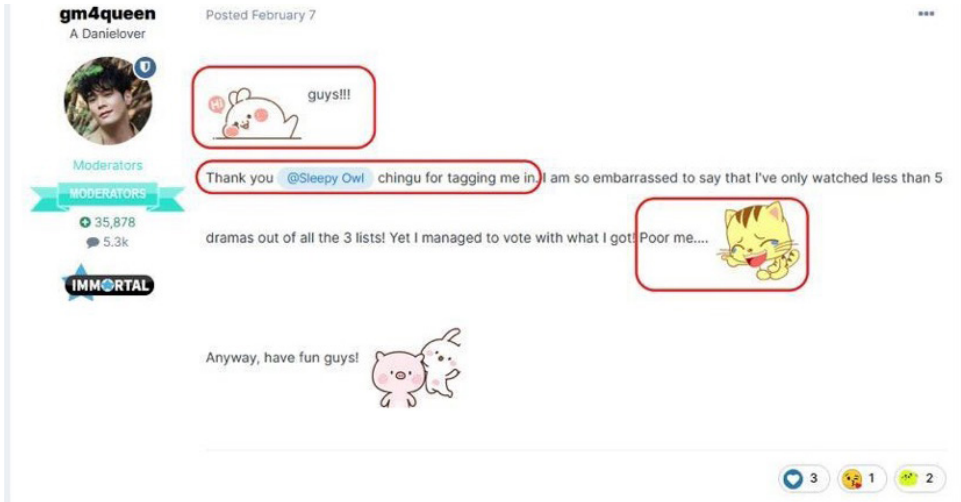


Fig. 5. Gm4queen greets other members using emojis to add emotion to the text.

Emojis, however, are not the only way users utilize the visual mode on Soompi forum posts. They also employ reaction GIFs (animated graphics) found outside of the message board. When user youngae says “I like it [sic] this drama it is fast pace [sic],” they feel the need to emphasize their opinion of a Korean TV show by adding a reaction GIF of a woman expressing surprise and awe with the caption “I’M IMPRESSED” (Fig. 6). As for linguistic choices, youngae’s English doesn’t follow standardized grammar rules, yet their meaning is perfectly clear to anyone reading the post (demonstrated by seven users liking the post on the lower left of Fig. 6).

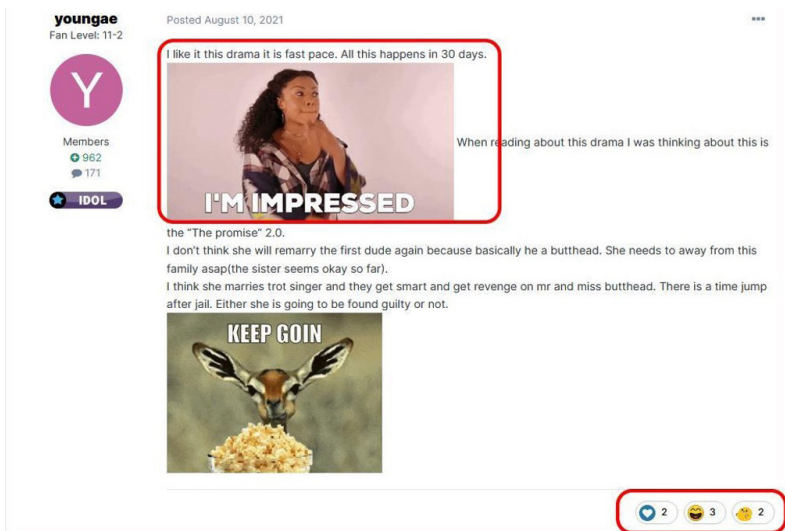


Fig. 6

Youngae uses reaction GIFs to further expand their meaning.

The third Soompi forum post not only has reaction GIFs and emojis to emphasize emotion and clarify the author's tone, but it also has the code-meshing of English and Romanized Korean. User `twinkle_little_star` responds to `partyon` with a Konglish (the mixture of Korean sounds and English words and vice-versa) word “hai” and a smiley face (Fig. 7). The scatter use of smileys demonstrates a desire to appear friendly and pleased. The user also ends their post with another instance of code-meshing: “thank you for understanding Oppa (smiley face) hwaiting.” The word *oppa* is a form of address reserved for women to refer to their brothers, but it is also used by women when talking to their male friends in a polite, sometimes admiring way. Finally, the post finishes off with an animated GIF of the TV character being “played” by the user, a character who has multiple personalities—demonstrated here by his use of a word reserved for women, despite presenting as male. The visual mode could signal that `twinkle_little_star` wanted to reinforce the “role-playing” aspect of their post—after all, most users would recognize the visual representation of the actor immediately, even if the text itself wasn’t clear enough.

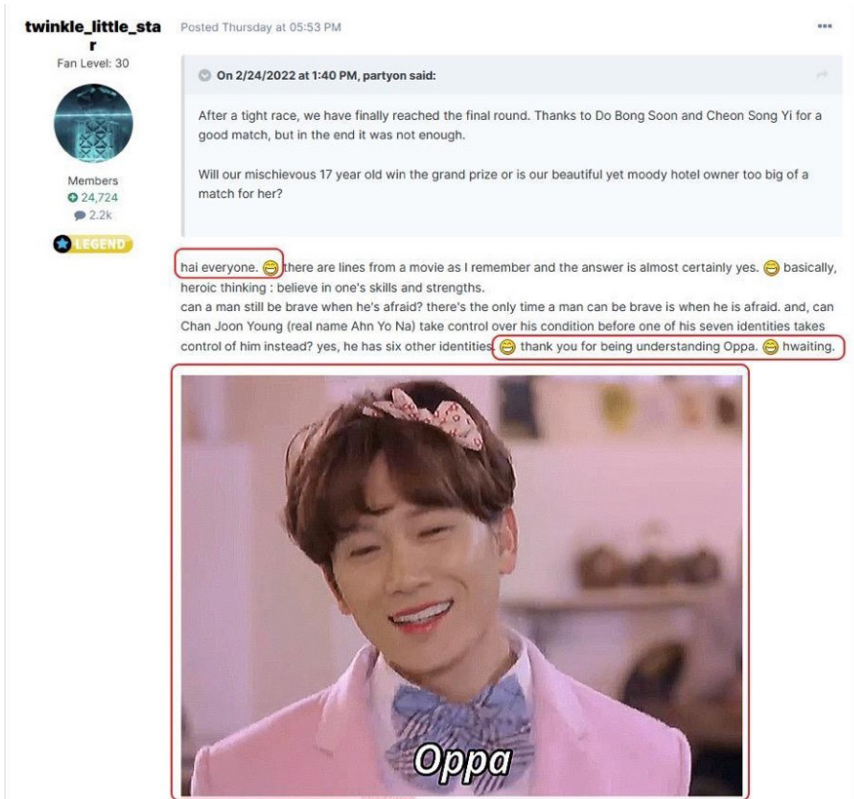


Fig. 7. Incorporation of multiple languages and modes in a post.

Considering Soompi's flexible rules on multiple language usage and the prominent multimedia tools offered to users, forum posts of this message board use ample multilingual and multimodal resources to communicate its users' enthusiasm and love for Korean pop culture. After consuming media in Korean, many users add Korean words to their vocabulary, and the extremely visual elements of the subjects discussed (music videos, TV shows, posters, and such) result in a desire to replicate the expressiveness of multimedia and the emotion-filled experience of consuming Korean pop culture. Adding words in Korean, emojis more aesthetically in line with Asian illustrations, and reaction GIFs to posts are how users achieve that result, demonstrating their knowledge and level of passion. By accepting and incentivizing multimodal and multilingual expression, Soompi acknowledges the cultural and social heterogeneous influences of its users, and thus offers a space full of examples of translingual communication as defined by the components previously discussed.

Kpopsource

Posts made on the Kpopsource message board share many of the translingual practices found on Soompi. For example, in Fig. 8, user yeji thanks another user for their support using code-meshing and the visual mode. "A true chingu" means "a true friend" and the emoji of a Korean actress praying expresses gratitude.

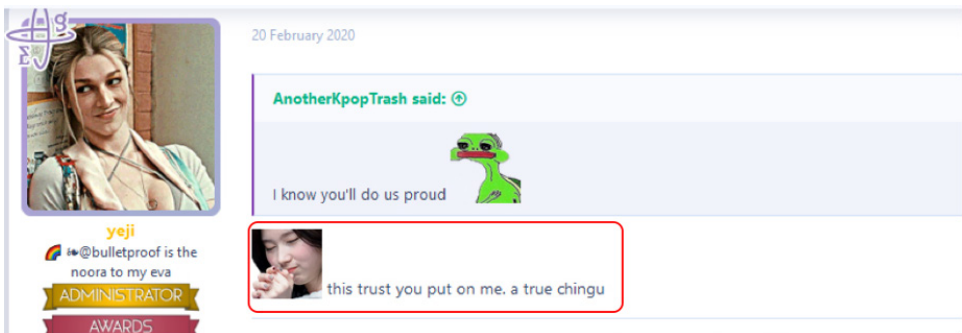


Fig. 8. User yeji thanks another user for their support using code-meshing and visual mode.

But Kpopsource also has examples of the use of the aural and spatial modes. User WinterFlower, for example, made a post called "Judge my Top Tracks for the last month" with no text and only a music playlist (Fig. 9). Other members of the message board could listen to their chosen songs and respond with their opinions and even their own playlists. Written text doesn't seem to be a requirement for a post to succeed.

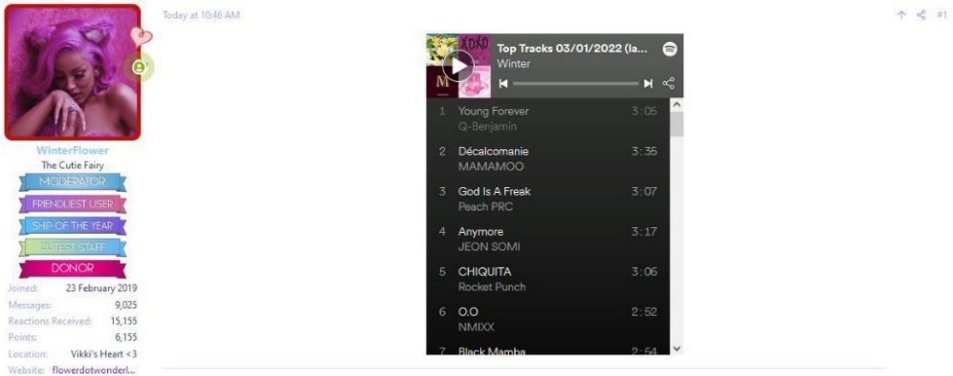


Fig. 9. WinterFlower shares her playlist.

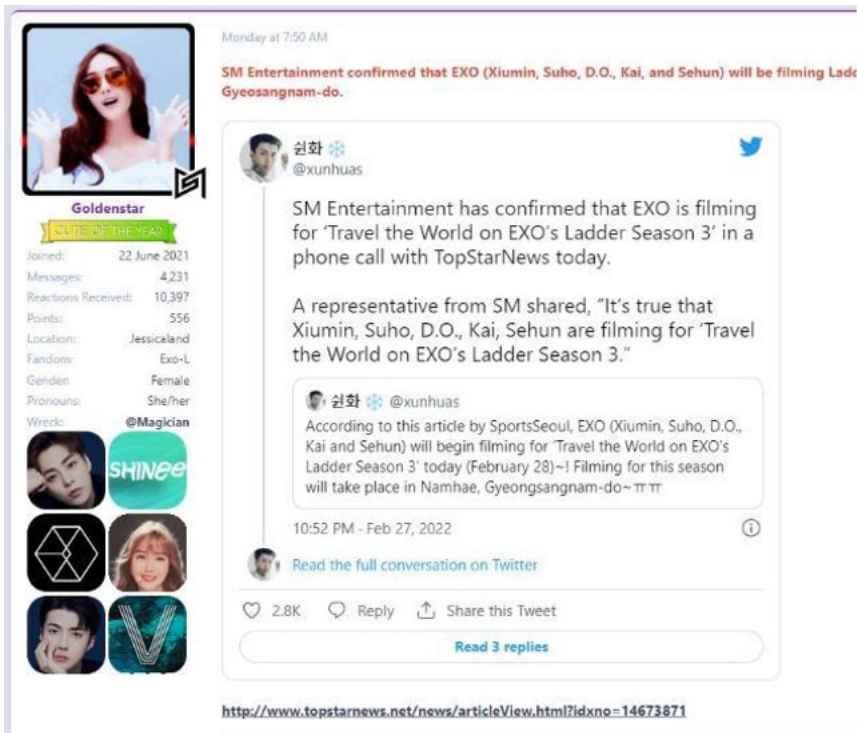


Fig. 10. Goldenstar shares in their post news and posts of other communities, including in Korean.

As for the spatial modality, user Goldenstar routinely connects the space of the message board with other social media by attaching tweets, Instagram photos, and YouTube videos on posts about the band EXO, including those written in Korean (Fig. 10). This brings the communities closer in the online

space, connecting the message board with other pop culture and Korean-speaking spaces.

Due to its stricter policies on the use of reaction GIFs and effects that might cause others discomfort, Kpopsource's posts rely more heavily on emojis and embedded content from other social media platforms to communicate meaning. Romanized Korean words such as chingu, oppa, hwaiting are often used, and like with Soompi, these multimodal and multilingual practices serve to unite the community via the replication of the media they consume. Present here is a focus on embracing language as fluid and accepting other modes of communication without applying judgment on the ways users express themselves.

Popjustice

By far the more unfriendly space for translingual practices, one would assume posts created in Popjustice would not incorporate multiple languages or modes of communication as the others analyzed earlier, but many instances of translingual practices were identified across threads and subforums. In one instance, a new member, Frederick, introduced himself by writing the post "Hi there everyone!" and adding a smiley face at the end of his single sentence. Matthew, a moderator and "Staff Member," responded to Frederick with a reminder of the forum rules, which don't allow for the use of smiley faces or emojis, as shown in Fig. 11.

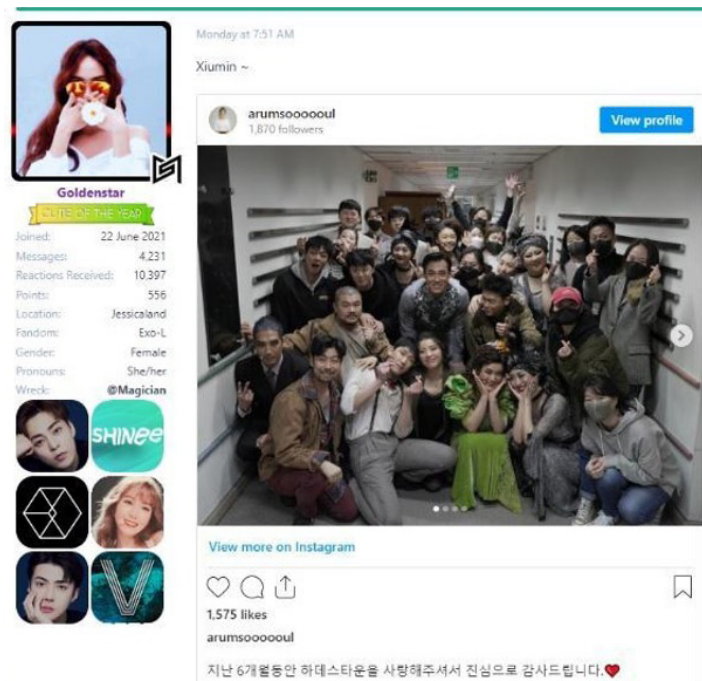


Fig. 11. Matthew greets Frederick.

In this instance, Frederick's visual mode of expression—possibly used with the goal of appearing friendly—was rebuked. Fredrick's reaction to the rule was to proclaim in another post “That is the dumbest fucking shit ever. Delete my account” (Smiley Extremist). He was promptly banned from the forum, and his username was changed to “Smiley Extremist” to the amusement of other members. However, although newer members might not be allowed to use smileys, other translingual practices seem to come naturally for older users of Popjustice, who continuously break the rules, not always writing in “fully formed English sentences” and definitely making posts “that consist entirely or mainly of a reaction GIF, a smiley, an emoji, webspeak” (Robison). A cursory search of common Romanized Korean words used often in the other message boards such as chingu, oppa, unnie, revealed over 400 posts in the last year. Fig. 12 provides an example of a post written entirely in Romanized Korean, responding to another member who code-meshed English with Romanized Korean (“annyeong haseyo fellow ahjumma”).

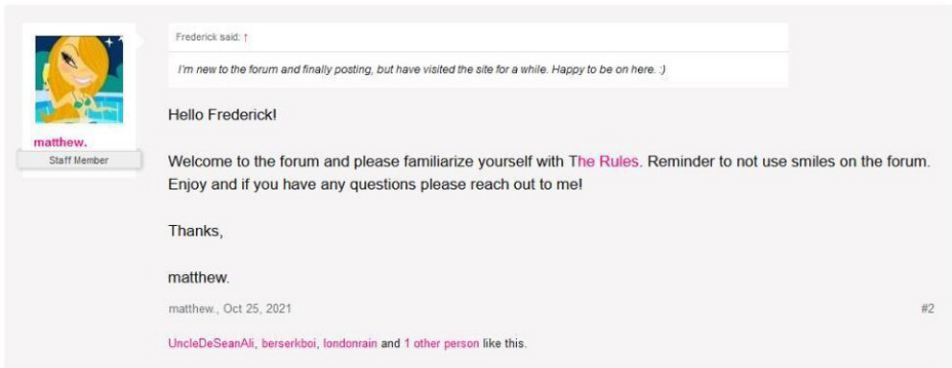


Fig. 12. Monkey0 responds to evilsin in Romanized Korean along with a GIF of an older, married woman or ahjumma.

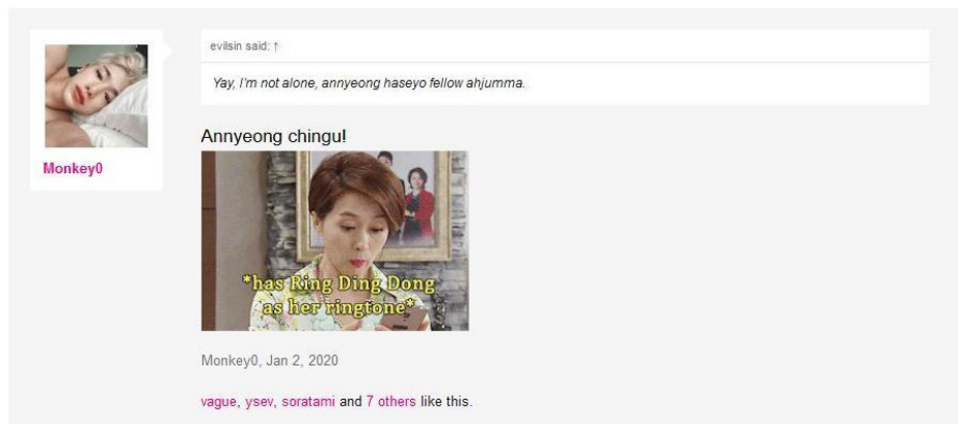


Fig. 13. Animated GIF of a character in a Korean television show along with a

description of the sound in the original scene.

Although Monkey0 addressed the other user as chingu (friend) instead of calling them ahjumma as well, they also added a GIF (Fig. 13) of a typical ahjumma (a married, middle-aged woman) character from a K-Drama. This GIF is notable because, unlike previous examples of the visual mode, it is not used to represent an emotion by the poster, but to evoke a particular identity shared between Monkey0 and evilsin: the ahjumma persona. They are both ahjummas and can relate to the actions being performed by the character depicted in the GIF. The gestures of this character, the way she moves, the way she looks at her phone, and demonstrates surprise on her face, are all elements typical of that identity. Thus, although still an example of visual mode, it also demonstrates that the writer wanted to use the gestural mode to convey the meaning of their post.

As for emojis and smileys, fig. 14 reveals moderators are not always banning people for using them. Codecat finishes their post with a smiley face holding a cup to celebrate how talented the discussed band is. Despite being against the rules, the post was well received by other members with eighteen others liking it.



Fig. 14. Codecat uses a smiley despite being against the rules.

Although Popjustice has stricter ideas on what 'proper' communication is and what that looks like, the continuous use and presence of multimodal and multilingual practices demonstrate its organic appeal. Users naturally navigate toward other modes of communication and incorporate niche terms in their posts, embracing the fluidity of translingualism to better express themselves.

Conclusion

Multilingual and multimodal practices are common and expected on forum posts made on message boards dedicated to Korean pop culture. These posts are made by people from all over the world who are willing to engage with another culture and language for their entertainment, thus, people who are already open to translingualism and accustomed to transnational content. Their contact with Korean culture and their desire to connect with others who share their passion is united by translingual practices. First, by using emojis and reaction gifs, they can transcend any perceived language barrier—even those who might not know Standard English rules are able to communicate successfully and express emotions that band the community together. This reflects a similar reliance on multimodal communication for better expression identified in Gonzales' article, where students with English as their second language had "a complex ability to layer modes and meaning in their translanguaging practices" due to their experience at "not having what they describe to be the 'right words' to convey their ideas" (16). Gonzales' article also demonstrates the importance of gestures as a way of communication by interpreting the student's hand movements while discussing different topics. Such elements of communication are missing on the internet, creating a barrier of intimacy and tone—online, how do you convey proper tone and how do you express close connection? By relying on visual cues, similar to the ones people use face-to-face, but adapted to the digital environment.

Second, posts with Korean words reveal a shared appreciation for the culture and a desire to showcase their knowledge. Although not analyzed here, there were many times where users would help each other understand and interpret the meaning of a scene or a song—those who knew the jargon and Korean words often chimed in to explain subtle references missed by others. Once the newest member gets the references, they replicate them as a sign of their dedication and time in the community. First comes love and passion, then comes the desire to understand better what you love and admire. In that aspect, translingual practices become second nature—not out of necessity, but out of a desire for connection.

Now, English is still the lingua franca on these three message boards and expected to be used in the majority of posts, but Soompi and Kpopsources' attitudes toward English are different from Popjustice. The latter indicates English to be the superior choice over any multimodal (no smiley or webspeak rule) and multilingual practices. Yet, despite this rule being an entry barrier for new people, Popjustice's users are just as likely to break these rules as members of other message boards. Although English is needed so that users from around the world all can understand each other, it is clear that Standard English is often ignored in favor of casual and instinctual English—the priority being expressing shared emotion and enthusiasm, not grammar. English seems to be a necessity, while Korean is the true language of connection and celebration within these

communities. To know Korean is to be closer to its artists and actors, and such, is to be a better fan of Korean pop culture and member of the discourse community.

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