

Latin pop and reggaeton in K-Pop: The representation of an imagined Latin culture

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Latin popular music has become, since early 2000s, a major force in the global musical market. The same can be said about the South Korean K-pop, whose prominence in the international scene has gradually become more and more salient in the last 10 years. This fact led to question the existing hegemony in the mainstream, as both cultural spheres – Latin America and South Korea - are not part of the Global North. The challenges the music produced in those contexts had to face throughout the 21st century, despite being amongst the most consumed worldwide, have been covered in several studies (Kim; Lee; Oh & Jang; Viñuela; Party).

But there is an aspect that is usually overlooked when talking about these two musical actors – their frequent contact with each other throughout their way to success. This has led to a continuous flux of influence of Latin popular music in K-pop productions. The aim of this paper is to analyze this specific relationship between the two industries mentioned above, from a musical and cultural perspective. This scope is part of my current research, in which I consider the former parameters alongside choreographic, lyric, audiovisual, reception and distribution aspects.

To enlighten the outcomes resultant of Latin popular music and K-pop encounters, two specific cases of study will be analyzed: the K-Pop soloist BoA's single "Valenti" (2002), and the K-Pop co-ed group K.A.R.D.'s single "Red Moon" (2020). In both songs, there is an obvious influence of Latin music productions. Yet, differences can be perceived, as they use the most internationally successful genres labelled as "Latin" in the moment of the single's release. In order to explain how and why those differences can be perceived in the productions mentioned above, two theoretical frameworks will be used. The first one will be the musical analysis theory of Allan Moore for popular music, giving prominence to aspects such as rhythm, modality, melody, and timbre (Moore). The second one will be the indexical index concept, developed by Raymond Monelle, which depicts the use of certain musical features discursively linked to specific cultural areas (Ogas, 108). A link that is culturally constructed in a communitarian imagination through identity articulation processes.

By combining those theoretical tools mentioned above, it is expected to highlight the elements, in terms of production, that enhance K-pop's cultural proximity to a culture globally labelled as "Latin". A label that has undergone a lot of changes throughout the years, as the different indexical indexes used in both analyzed cases will show. In addition, it will be briefly discussed how the use of those indexical indexes were part of the "internationalization" process of K-pop – a strategy that was part and parcel of the South Korean industry since the 90s (Kim, 34).

Latin pop influences in K-pop in early 2000s: the case of BoA's "Valenti"

BoA is a female K-pop soloist managed by SM Entertainment since her debut in 2000, and a very well-known case of international success within the K-pop industry. She was one of the first Korean artists to gain exceptional recognition and commercial profits from a foreign market – the Japanese one. One of the key factors that led to BoA's extraordinary performance in the Japanese market was her image management, carefully designed by her company. Oscillating between a Japanese identity and a non-located global one, BoA gained the Japanese audience favor (Kim, 36).

One of the songs that best embody the aim of making BoA a global star, with no national affiliation, is "Valenti". This was a pre-released single promoted in both Japan (the Japanese Version) and South Korea (the Korean Version) in 2002 – it would be later featured in the Japanese *Valenti* album (2003) and the Korean *Miracle* special album (2002). This single was successful in Japan, where it was first released, performing really well on local charts (Oricon News). This success can be attributed not only to the general marketing strategies developed by SM

Entertainment – using a globally well-known musical genre as one of the main influences in “Valenti”’s production was also a key factor.

This global musical genre was Latin pop, a genre tag created by the US market during the 90s. The aim of this label was to appeal to an increasingly numerous Latin audiences, who was actively spending its money in its own cultural products, such as music. Anglophone artists started to use certain musical features in order to accommodate themselves in this label of “Latin pop” (Viñuela, 16). These features, such as the use of bongos, Spanish guitars or Andalusian cadences worked as indexical index of an imagined “Latin culture” - a cultural construct that blended Spanish and Latin American cultures, without attending to the specificity of both cultural areas. However, as much artificially constructed as it was, this cultural blend was successful not only in the US, but in the global market. And this is the reason why the genre was chosen to market BoA internationally outside South Korea. Presenting her as a “global artist” aligned with international trends would make more appealing BoA’s image as an artist in Japan, as her “Korean-ness” was reduced, in favor of an imagined “Latin-ness”. This embodiment of a cultural Other, with which South Korea nor Japan would identify, added an exotic “flavor” to BoA’s career, showing her artistic and identity versatility. A versatility that was not a threat to SM’s aim of marketing her as an international artist, able to cope with the mainstream latest trends.

But, how does “Valenti” recreate that “Latin flavor”? It does so by using some of the most prominent Latin pop’s - the most successful Latin genre at the time - features as indexical indexes of an imagined Latin culture. The rhythmic patron of “habanera”, consistently used during the vast majority of the song, works in this production as one of the most evident indexical indexes of Latinness. This rhythmic patron was present in the U.S. popular music since the 20th century as part of its Latin heritage – its link with tango (Brewer, 302) leads to an inevitable association with Latin American dances. Nevertheless, the rhythmic layer is not the only one in which it can be found references to Latin music. When focusing on timbre, a guitar can be identified in one of the instrumental layers, showcasing some virtuoso features that are typical from Latin Pop (Party, 69) - especially in the second part of the bridge (section D). In the melodic-harmonic domain, several indexical indexes of Latin-Hispanic musical cultures can be identified as well. One of the most representative of the Hispanic music, the Andalusian cadence over a Phrygian mode - over a G# modal tonic in this case – can be heard in the second part of section B, the pre-chorus between the verse and the chorus. The use of melisma and syncope in melody, usual as Hispanic music’s indexical indexes (Alonso, 102), and the whispering and onomatopoeic ad-libs, similar to the flamenco resources displayed in Latin pop (Viñuela, 16), can be identified as well.

The use of Latin pop features in “Valenti” is nonetheless coexisting with K-pop characteristic technical elements. The most salient one would be the structure, that consist of: intro (00”-21”) A (21”-39”) B (39”-51”) C (51”-1’12”) A (1’12”-1’30”) B (1’30”-1’42”) C (1’42”-2’02”) D (2’02”-2’22”) B (2’22”-2’36”) C (2’36”-3’13”) outro (3’13”-3’32”), the model of most K-pop songs in the first decade of the 21st century. These time marks have been extracted from the track’s length on Spotify. As much as “habanera” rhythm patron has an almost omnipresence during the song, another patron, the binary dance beat, typical of K-pop tracks, has its own space in “Valenti” – it is particularly relevant during the bridge, D. The use of electronic timbres is linked with K-pop’s productions in early 2000s and combined in “Valenti” with the guitar mentioned above. They are the lead timbres in the bridge, being heard nonetheless during the entire song. It is also worth highlighting the use of a stable tonal system most of the time and the increased textural density and vocal virtuosity in the climatic ending, trademarks of K-pop productions.

Those aforementioned features are intertwined in the “Valenti”’s production, giving it the “exotic”, “Latin” flavor that presented BoA as an artist with her own “Korean-ness” greatly reduced. And this is one of the musical strategies that SM Entertainment used to favor the BoA’s establishment in the Japanese market as an international, appealing global artist able to produce the most trending sounds.

Reggaeton influences in K-pop after 2017: the case of K.A.R.D.’s “Red Moon”

“Valenti” was one of the first examples of blending K-pop with Latin popular music. But it was not the last one. Several examples followed up that song throughout the 21st century. One of the most recent ones is co-ed group K.A.R.D.’s “Red Moon”. This group debuted in 2016, and, since then, their presence in the Latin American market was surprisingly remarkable. Their worldwide tours have an unusual number of dates in Latin American cities, being quickly sold out (Yang). This is in part due to a constant use of Latin music influences in their discography, which is especially obvious in “Red Moon”, released in 2020 as the promotional single of the homonymous album. In this song, as in BoA’s case, K-Pop and Latin American music genres are blended. However, Latin pop

is no longer used in the K-pop's production, being replaced by reggaeton as a musical source of "Latinness". What is the reason behind this change? It is ultimately the worldwide success of reggaeton in the mainstream market. Since its birth in Puerto Rico in the 90s, this musical genre has established itself as a global sensation. The popularity of reggaeton around the world only increased in 2017, with the international success of "Despacito", by Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee – after this turning point, reggaeton became one of the most streamed genres in the global market (Arias Salvado, 133).

The parallelism with the strategies used in BoA's "Valenti" can be seen now – as in the early 2000s song, in "Red Moon" K.A.R.D. is relying in the most popular Latin genre of their time to produce a Latin "flavored" K-pop track. But the relationship between reggaeton and K-pop is slightly different from that of Latin pop and the South Korean genre – they share features that helps to create a convincing symbiosis. Both reggaeton and K-pop are dance-oriented genres, that were born very close to street culture, especially to hip hop. The mix of rap and melody throughout the songs, a characteristic easily seen in both genres' productions, reflects that, as well as it does the aesthetics of the performances and MVs. Reggaeton and K-pop also share another crucial characteristic that is not necessarily related to hip hop – the lyrics often, if not always, present a mix of languages within the same song. In the case of reggaeton, those languages are usually Spanish and English. In K-pop, the languages involved in that mix are often Korean and English.

But how does "Red Moon" present the relationship mentioned above, and the influence of reggaeton in K-pop in general? This song's production does it by using the following features all along the track. One of the most easily recognized is the use of the reggaeton dembow as one of the main rhythmic patrons during most of the song. Nonetheless, this is not the only reggaeton feature that can be found in the rhythmic production of "Red Moon". The regular use of hi-hats, a characteristic timbre of reggaeton and Latin trap, as well as the presence of marimbas, typical from Puerto Rican reggaeton (Arias Salvado, 115), are remarkable as well. When talking about vocals, it can be also seen clear influences from the Latin American urban genre. The use of Spanish words in the lyrics, the emphasis of the /t/ phonetic sound in the ad-libs, and the explicit use of Auto Tune as a vocal timbre – already in decline as such at this time in K-pop – are the most evident ones.

In the harmonic domain, it cannot be identified reggaeton features as such, but influences from a broad understanding of "Hispanic popular music". This is the reason behind the use of some of the same harmonic characteristics seen in "Valenti", now coexisting alongside reggaeton influences. The Phrygian mode, with G# as a modal tonic during the most part of the song, and D# as a modal tonic in the bridge, is the most present one throughout "Red Moon". But also, Andalusian cadences can be seen, especially at the end of each chorus.

The characteristics explained above, all indexical indexes of Latinness in this K.A.R.D.'s song, are nevertheless intertwined with K-pop features, as in "Valenti"'s case. They are not many, but they are remarkable. The structure is one of the main ones. "Red Moon" presents the typical K-pop structure of its time (the time marks presented in this paper have been extracted from the track's length on Spotify). There is a brief instrumental intro (00"-05"), that presents the verses' main electronic riff. Then, verses (05"-24"; 1'12"-1'42";) are presented, followed by pre-choruses (24"-34"; 1'42"-1'53"). They link the verses to the chorus (34"-1'12"; 1'53"-2'31"; 2'41"-2'52"), which contains the song's hook. Close to the end of the song, a bridge is presented (2'31"-2'41"), in which a dance break can be performed by the group. This structure rose in popularity since 2010 in K-pop, and showed slight changes, if any at all, up to date. Another evident feature from the South Korean genre is the use of binary rhythm, stable throughout the song.

As discussed above, K.A.R.D.'s strategy is not very different from BoA's case – they are using a mainstream Latin genre as an inspiration for their production. The aim of it is not only to gain popularity amongst the global audience, but to maintain their impact within Latin America, where they have established a large fanbase. By incorporating reggaeton's musical features as indexical index of Latinness, they are not only updating the Latinness representation in South Korea – they are also trying to be appealing aligning themselves as a group to the current musical sensibility in Latin America and the global stage.

Conclusion

As explained above through the two examples discussed in this paper, K-Pop's relationship with, and representation of, Latinness has evolved since early 2000s up to date. This evolution is linked with global music market's trends – from Latin pop to reggaeton, the source of musical elements linked to Latin culture has been determined by the mainstream dynamics. BoA's "Valenti" is an example of the former, being K.A.R.D.'s "Red Moon" one of the latter.

In addition, it was also explained how those Latin music's influences were used as indexical indexes of Latinness, and the reason behind this fact. K-pop has pursued, since the late 90s, an international success (Kim, 34). One of the strategies used during the 21st century was not only the alignment with global trends – reducing the Korean-ness of local artists was also a recurrent tool in the pursue of internationalization. In both cases previously presented, the aim of using indexical indexes of Latinness was, in part, to present both BoA and K.A.R.D. as artists embodying an idea of Latinness. An idea that would help reduce their Korean-ness and favor their entrance in foreign markets (Japan and Latin American, respectively). By doing so, the idea of “internationalization” and “embodiment of Latinness” are intertwined in the productions that are consciously using influences of Latin American popular music within K-pop industry. For it to be successful, this strategy needs not only to use identifiable musical features from Latin American music – it needs them to be linked in the global imaginary to the Latin American cultural communities. It needs them to be indexical indexes of Latinness.

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