



Fig. 1: Random dance play at Kosmic Spotlight, 2022. (Photo by author, 2022)

Fig. 2: The crowd at KCAKL, 2023. (Photo by author, 2023)

Fig. 3: The launch of K-POLYS at the Ellen Melville Centre, 2024. (Photo by author, 2024)

Fig. 4: Real Groovy's dedicated K-Pop section, taken at a listening party for Rosé, 2024. (Photo by author, 2024)

Hallyu on High Street: Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland As a Site of Urban K-Pop Culture

Fine Lavoni Koloamatangi

In Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland's city centre lies the High Street district, well-known for its cafes, restaurants, boutiques, and bookstores. It is also home to Auckland's unofficial Koreatown, although those living in Takapuna or Rosedale may beg to differ! Eateries selling Korean food, coffee, and desserts have proliferated in recent years, alongside Korean beauty outlets, photobooths, and *noraebang* (singing rooms). The High Street district and surrounding midtown have become manifestations of the *Hallyu Wave* worldwide.

The 2023 Census shows that around one-third of Aotearoa New Zealand's population lives in Tāmaki Makaurau.¹ The city is also Aotearoa's most multicultural, with large numbers of Asian, Pacific, and Indigenous Māori peoples throughout the region. As a K-Pop fan of Tongan descent, born and raised in Auckland and researching Pacific K-Pop fans, I have observed firsthand how changing demographics have impacted engagement with K-pop in the city.

The city centre embodies the intersection between location and demographics. On one side of the High Street district, towards Rangipuke Albert Park, are two universities, the University of Auckland and AUT University, which both boast sizeable student communities. These institutions help to increase the city centre's daytime population significantly.² The area is therefore associated with young people, which is where the K-Pop dance scene comes in, as both universities currently have Korean and K-Pop student clubs.

In September 2022, *Kosmic Spotlight*, a performing arts charity showcase concert, took place at the district's Ellen Melville Centre. This event resulted from a collaboration between three clubs: K-POP Planet, Auckland University Dance Association from the University of Auckland, and NZKDA, a group who have nurtured

a lively K-Pop dance community. All three groups comprise youth from different ethnic backgrounds including Asian, Māori, Pacific, and Pākehā (European New Zealander). The concert featured performances and included a segment of the popular 'random dance play' [Fig.1].³

KCAKL was held at the Ellen Melville Centre in March 2023 as the culminating event of a weeklong celebration of Korean culture. The area was packed, with the audience enthusiastically supporting performances by Paul Kim, AleXa, and Peakaboy [Fig. 2].

Less than a year later, K-POLYS, a documentary about the journeys of three Pacific K-Pop fans in Aotearoa,⁴ was also launched at the Centre [Fig. 3].

Although each of these events warrants individual consideration, their shared location enables a strong collective significance. The events represent localised instances of transnational *Hallyu* culture, and the High Street district has become an area where these localised instances converge and transpire.

Despite the concentration of *Hallyu*-related events in the High Street district, there has been diffusion to other precincts. High Street is bordered to the south by Victoria Street, where Real Groovy sits at its western end. Opened in 1981, it is Aotearoa's largest supplier of new and used music. The store has a dedicated K-Pop section, which sports a range of old and new releases [Fig. 4].

In December 2024, Real Groovy and Warner Music New Zealand hosted a listening party celebrating the release of Rosé, BLACKPINK member Rosé's album. The event was well attended, and although Rosé's album was marketed as mainstream pop, most of the attendees were K-Pop fans – the photocards in phones or hanging from bags were a give-away! There was a subtle interplay of location and demographics, where local time zone

privileges were taken advantage of – attendees were technically the first fans in the world to hear the album. Moreover, local connections were highlighted: although she grew up in Australia, Rosé was born in Aotearoa, so it felt like we were listening to the musical output of a fellow Kiwi, albeit one who turned into a global superstar.

As part of an earlier generation of fans who mainly experienced K-Pop and *Hallyu* content online (necessitated in large part by Aotearoa's geographical isolation), attending these events was surreal. Until recently, transnational popular culture could only be experienced intermittently, during concerts and niche events such as Armageddon, New Zealand's largest annual pop culture convention, or in a small section of a novelty gift store tucked away in an old shopping arcade. Today, transnational popular culture is more visible in Tāmaki Makaurau, with K-Pop fan groups dancing around the city centre.

The increased visibility of transnational popular culture correlates with the increased visibility of migrant communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. But this is occurring amidst heightened awareness of the importance of honouring Māori as *tāngata whenua* (Indigenous; lit. "people of the land"). Central to this awareness is Te Tiriti o Waitangi, a founding document of Aotearoa which, although viewed as a formal agreement between Māori and the British Crown establishing a bicultural framework of engagement, extends to encompass the different peoples who now call the country home. A key aspiration of Te Tiriti, underpinned by Māori values such as *manaakitanga* (hospitality; generosity; care for others) and *whanaungatanga* (relationship; kinship), is that Aotearoa would become a place where all communities could thrive. *Tāngata tiriti* (non-Māori who reside in Aotearoa) therefore have a duty to uphold Te Tiriti and, in light of the Crown's failure

to honour their treaty obligations, support Māori in their fight for *tinio rangatiratanga* (sovereignty). Any recognition or appreciation of the country's increasing diversity and multiculturalism needs to be premised with these points.

The High Street district growing into a transnational cultural hub is a prime example of the multifaceted changes occurring in Aotearoa. Its Asian stores, as well as the cultural events, add vitality and inject new meaning into the Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland urban landscape, making it a more authentic reflection of a diverse and vibrant society.

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Notes

- 1 Stats NZ. "2023 Census national and regional data." Accessed February 3, 2025. <https://www.stats.govt.nz/infographics/2023-census-national-and-regional-data/#auckland>
- 2 Heart of the City Auckland. "City demographics." Accessed February 3, 2025. <https://www.heartcity.co.nz/city-centre/results-and-statistics/city-demographics>
- 3 RDP is a game where participants form a large circle and K-Pop song choruses are played in succession. Anyone who knows the associated choreography runs into the middle of the circle to perform the dance.
- 4 The Spinoff. "Meet three Pacific K-Pop fans | K-POLYS | The Spinoff." Documentary. Posted March 19, 2024. YouTube, 18:51. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M58OcY1xayg>