

MUSIC VIDEO AND ONLINE SOCIAL MEDIA:
A CASE STUDY OF THE DISCOURSE AROUND JAPANESE IMAGERY
IN THE NEW ZEALAND INDIE SCENE

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ABSTRACT

This article offers original insights into the construction of musical meaning through an intensification and bricolage of postmodern discourse as a result of music video as online media. The discussion contributes to contemporary popular music scholarship by discussing the 'Stranger People' video by Doprah, an indie band from Christchurch, New Zealand, with particular focus on Japanese imagery and online social media. The significance of 'Stranger People' is that it received a great deal of international attention via social and other media. The article focuses on not only the means of video production, distribution, and consumption, but also the threads of cultural knowledge that are generated through media response to sight and sound and how this creates and re-creates meaning for fans and artists alike. The video serves as a particularly useful case for acknowledging and analysing the extent to which Japanese pop culture has become enmeshed in global cultural flows, and as a site for critical discussion on the localised and creative response to Japanese cultural flows.

Keywords: music videos; online social media; Japanese imagery; New Zealand indie scene

INTRODUCTION

'A sinister and evil cult which lures young people into drug-taking': this is the self-description of the type of music that Christchurch (New Zealand) indie band Doprah uses to describe itself on its Facebook and Bandcamp pages (Doprah 2015a, 2015b).³ This provocative statement seems to challenge the continuing proliferation of distinct pop music styles, and in doing so, frames the band as having a somewhat subversive *raison d'être*. Indeed, Doprah, which was formed in 2012 by founding members Indira Force and Steven Marr, has

reinforced its provocative narrative in pop music by generating mainstream media and social media attention – and contention – when it released its music video ‘Stranger People’ in June 2014 (Doprah 2014).⁴ The video was nominated for the Best Music Video at the 2014 New Zealand Music Awards, and achieved over 100,000 hits on YouTube in less than a year. What is particularly discernible about this video is its parodic performance visuals in the style of a branch of J-pop, but with music that has no discernible influence from or connection to this style of Japanese popular music. More specifically, the imagery presented in ‘Stranger People’ alludes to the ‘cute’ (*kawaii*) Japanese pop cultural representations which are found in some music videos of contemporary Japanese pop icons such as Kyari Pamyu Pamyu (Host 2015; Pham 2015),⁵ and thus is situated in a context of cultural difference, exoticism, and Orientalism (Said 1979). More broadly, as Railton and Watson assert with reference to cultural representation in music video, ‘the production of ethnicity as exotic “other” [involves . . .] not only the text of the video itself but also a range of intertexts which are brought to bear on its comprehension’ (2011, 110).

This article offers original insight into the construction of musical meaning as a result of music video as online media. This type of postmodern discourse, or intertextuality, is based on a bricolage that comprises the ‘rearrangement and juxtaposition of previous unconnected signs to produce new codes of meaning’ (Barker 2012, 206). The discussion in this article contributes to contemporary popular music scholarship by discussing the ‘Stranger People’ video and online social media in the context of appropriating Japanese imagery. By using this video as a case study, we place emphasis on online social media as a tool for not only the distribution of popular music, but also as a way of engaging with fans, as well as a medium for entering into a process of re-thinking and re-framing the original product as a result of online discourse. The band simultaneously launched itself within and beyond New Zealand predominantly through contemporary media formats that currently embrace the free distribution of popular music, and in doing so ‘Stranger People’ received a great deal of international response in social and other media. The ‘Stranger People’ video and the responses to it are entwined in discourses that highlight the capacity of online music videos to help produce cultural meaning pertaining to sound and image. In this article, we focus not only on the means of video production, distribution, and consumption, but also on the threads of cultural knowledge that are generated through media response to sight and sound, and how this creates and re-creates meaning for fans and artists alike. While the ‘Stranger People’ video was a one-off example of Doprah’s re-interpretation of Japanese pop music/culture imagery – a ‘souvenir of the exotic’ (Stewart 1993, 146) – it serves as a particularly useful case for acknowledging and analysing the ex-

tent to which Japanese pop culture has become enmeshed in global cultural flows (Iwabuchi 2002, 2004; Novak 2013; Yano 2013), and as a site for critical discussion of the localised creative response to such Japanese cultural flows. As Iwabuchi has commented, ‘global cultural flows have decentered the power structure *and* vitalized local practices of appropriation and consumption of foreign cultural products and meanings’ (*italics in original*) (2002, 35).

By considering ‘Stranger People’ as primarily an internet-based music video through which band, fans, consumers, and media intersect, this context can then become the focal point for scholarly discussion. Not only can we analyse the sounds and moving images as a semiotic text, but we are also privy to discussions by critics and fans that play out in posted comments that accompany videos on websites such as YouTube. When we move beyond the video itself as an absolute text and consider the information linked to, through, as well as embedded in it, the video and the public discourse become part of the same media text; in the case of ‘Stranger People’ for instance, one mouse-click and the viewer is privy to numerous responses and perspectives. Such discourse does not stop in the discussion section, and bloggers and conventional media outlets alike literally link themselves into the discussion. Thus, the video is embedded on other sites where new readings are ascribed and more discussions take place. The degree to which these discussions are public or private is also indistinct depending on the readers’ memberships to various social networks (for example, in our case, as researchers). Nonetheless, the public discourse is evident and largely accessible.

In light of the online media through which ‘Stranger People’ is distributed, read, and interpreted, our exploration of the video draws heavily upon the discourses surrounding the video. As ethnomusicologists broadly concerned with researching people making and engaging with popular music, we have studied the music video through an ethnographic lens, describing and analysing its context of production, distribution, and consumption in a contemporary online cultural setting. We draw on online user discussions (e.g. artists, critics, and fans), public forums, and media reports as data sets. Indeed, the discourse becomes the centre of investigation. Further, the research process has also included video ethnography, interviews with the founding members of the band and key members of the video production team, and surveys of New Zealand and Japanese tertiary education students on their perceptions of the images and sounds portrayed in the video.

The article draws from the study of music videos as a distinct field of cultural analysis (e.g. Vernallis 2004), as well as critical cultural studies in terms

of popular music and visual interpretation. As a way of attempting to comprehend ‘Stranger People’ as a polysemic sign that extends the notion of the postmodern pop video, the article draws on the notion of intertextuality, as presented in Shuker’s (1994, 137) comments on Jameson’s (1984) thoughts on music videos as “‘meta entertainments’ that embody the postmodern condition’. Shuker notes that in order ‘to explain the nature of their [music video] appeal it is necessary to go beyond their purely textual aspects, and consider their function as polysemic narratives and images of viewer fantasy and desire’ (1994, 145). A similar perspective on music video is noted by Meinhof and van Leeuwen (2000, 62), who comment that ‘intertextual readings now comprise the many different social and cultural reference points which viewers use in the process of making meanings’. However, with the advent of online social media and the engagement of users and music consumers with the construction of meaning around a music video, the extent of intertextuality has been extended beyond those put forward by Shuker, and has become significantly more visible, multi-layered, and interactive.

The main thrust of this article is our analytical discussion of ‘Stranger People’. This is structured in three parts, each providing insight into how meanings are constructed as a result of online interaction. The first of these parts, ‘Pop music video and online social media’, discusses the context of the video in relation to media and online social media responses, particularly as this was how we were drawn to the video in the first place. The second of these parts, ‘(Re-) writing culture’, builds on the notion of such media and discusses the making of the video. The last section, ‘The intensified postmodern paradigm’, examines ‘Stranger People’ by reflecting on its connection with Japanese cultural flows and recontextualisation more broadly, and includes a discussion of responses as expressed during our interviews with the band’s two main members and the video makers.

POP MUSIC VIDEO AND ONLINE SOCIAL MEDIA

The popularisation of the music video, touted as ‘one of the most interesting things that happened in the media landscape of the eighties and the nineties’ (Sibilla 2010, 225), has drawn attention from a significant number of scholars (Sibilla 2010, 231). Early music videos were disseminated through the televised format, which was an extension of the established radio-programming model. In this innovative music video context, the majority of scholarly publications concerning music videos were undertaken in the 1990s, and these tended to theorise them as predominantly visual-based polysemic and fractured post-modern texts (e.g. Fiske 1986; Goodwin 1991; Straw 1988, 1993; Tetzlaff 1986).

These seminal studies however, were undertaken at a time when music videos were broadcast only as televised media. Scholarly discourse concerning music videos has not, for the most part, re-thought video in the internet age.

Nowadays, while many music video conventions have remained intact, the main platform through which videos are broadcast/consumed is entirely different to that of the 1980s and 1990s. In the online context, YouTube is the predominant video sharing website, which along with others offering similar formats, did not simply replace older broadcasting models, but significantly transformed the way users and creators engage with and conceptualise the music video. Studies have shown that video-sharing sites such as YouTube provide multiple purposes for users, including personal archiving, identity formation, social interaction, and information sharing (see Lingel and Naaman 2012 for a concise literature review). The platform has also transformed the way amateur and independent musicians and video makers have engaged with the medium. In the words of Beer, online video sharing platforms have facilitated the 'democratization of music distribution toward decentralized models' (Beer 2008, 223; see also Jones 2000). A handful of preliminary studies of online music videos have focused on the nature of music videos as user-created cultural productions, and emphasise that videos are now defined by their capacity for user-interaction (previously referred to as Web 2.0). Edmond, for example, notes that online music videos have blurred the medium's definitive boundaries, arguing that fan-made versions and parodies also encroach into the music videos' conceptual space, summarising that 'all these forms of music video remixing, repurposing, and reimaging contribute to a much more expansive textuality' (Edmond 2014, 313).

As a new release, 'Stranger People' soon made No. 2 in the New Zealand Independent Album Charts (IMNZ Album Charts 2014), No. 18 in the Official New Zealand Top 40 Albums (New Zealand Music Chart 2014), and No. 2 in the globally-aggregated Billboard Next Big Sound Chart (Brandle 2014). The video and audio also received critical coverage in alternative/independent media and blogs, as well as mainstream media.⁶ Almost all of the reviews of the song focused on the Japanese-influenced imagery as depicted in the video, and not the musical or lyrical aspects. For example, headlines included 'Watch New Zealand band Doprah's wild new video, inspired by J-pop' (Pigeons and Planes 2015), and 'Weird of the day: Doprah's kawaii J-pop homage, "Stranger People"' (Weird of the Day 2015). Echoing the mainstream media coverage of the AKB48 controversy about Minami Minegishi (Shadbolt 2013), which we will return to later, some media sites labelled the video 'bizarre' and 'controversial'. For example, the mainstream media website, Stuff.co.nz, published an article entitled

'Kiwi band's Japanese video causes a stir', claiming that the band had 'sparked a conversation about cultural appropriation, with some online commenters criticising the band for taking on a different culture' (Downes 2014). The article also included perspectives from Dr Rumi Sakamoto, a specialist in the field of Japanese and Asian Studies at the University of Auckland. She stated that 'cultural appropriation could be considered problematic when there was a power relationship between two groups, with the dominant culture adopting elements of a minority of powerless culture', and insisted that 'no such power relations existed between Japan and New Zealand' (Downes 2014). In other words, she defuses the idea that Doprah or their song might cause Japanese offence. This scholarly commentary provided an authoritative explanation for the cultural borrowing from J-pop (at least one style within this vast pop music category), and it also explicitly sanctioned the appropriation of aspects of J-pop imagery in the New Zealand context, thus attempting to defuse any perception that the video, band, or nation might be portraying New Zealand pop musicians in a way that might cause offence to Japanese. However, as shown in more detail below, the video imagery did provoke a great deal of media and social media commentary, which in turn was acknowledged by the song and video makers with their own examination and elucidation of the video's *raison d'être*, thus perpetuating the intertextual dynamics that are now so often a part of the construction of meaning for the contemporary pop music video.

In a preview of Doprah's debut performance in New York's *CMJ* (College Media Journal) in 2014, at the time of its first tour to the US, 'Stranger People' was described as 'a dark parody of Kyari Pamyu Pamyu's 2012 video for "Ponponpon"' (Exposito 2014), thus extending the video's musical and cultural associations. The same reviewer also posed several questions about Doprah's video: 'Was it an insensitive act of cultural appropriation, aimed pointedly at Japan's leading Harajuku heroine? Or does it serve to criticize the general infantilization of young female performers?' Answers to such questions are explored later in this article. For now it will suffice to emphasise the importance of this article's extension of the notion of intertextuality to include references to online social media as a way of layering the video with meaning as produced through the process of fan and/or media commentary as a response to the inherent signs as presented in the video content itself. Indeed, as noted by one media commentator: 'The J-Pop inspired video for "Stranger People" triggered a wave of blog action following its premiere in June, which in turn helped the Christchurch outfit launch high [achieving No. 2] on Billboard's Next Big Sound chart the following month' (Brandle 2014).

The 'Stranger People' video was released on YouTube on 24 June 2014, and at

the time of writing, has incurred over 159,000 views, 1477 likes and 195 dislikes (Doprah 2014). Users have interacted with the video in two main ways: commenting and ‘up-voting’ or ‘down-voting’ (via thumbs up and thumbs down icons).⁷ User responses to ‘Stranger People’ were mostly positive, with less than just 15% of those who interacted with the video expressing a thumbs-down. While the negative responses are relatively low, ‘Stranger People’ is notably more ‘disliked’ than their first single, of which only 3.5% of this kind of interaction were ‘dislikes’ (Doprah 2013).⁸ A large proportion of the comments on the ‘Stranger People’ video, and the resulting discussion posted as replies, concerns the video’s visual references, particularly the imagery that seems to signify Japanese pop culture. At the time of analysing (late 2014), the video had received 154 unique comments (not including comments and discussion on comments).⁹ Of these, 41 discussed or identified in some way the video’s Japanese imagery: this was either broad, such as describing it as ‘Japanese’, ‘J-pop’, ‘J-fashion’, ‘lolita’, ‘Harajuku’ or ‘*kawaii*’, or more specific, such as naming Japanese pop icon Kyari Pamyu Pamyu (KPP) as an influence, or even more specifically her ‘Ponponpon’ video of 2011, which seems to have been a main influence for the ‘Stranger People’ imagery. Of these comments, 17 were overtly critical of the band’s appropriation of Japanese pop culture, and 15 were positive or supported it. The remaining nine were ambiguous or neutral. It is via these sorts of comments that the globalisation of Japanese cultural elements should be viewed more as a flow of ideas influenced in connection with Japan, although not necessary exclusively from Japan, thus locating the ‘Stranger People’ video imagery in the broader context of cultural influences. Whereby, ‘the globalisation of J-pop is not a circulation of Japanese popular music as a self-contained form, but rather the globalisation of Japanese-styled cultural life’ (Mōri 2014, 221).

One of the critical posts to the video was the most ‘upvoted’ comment on the thread (with 23 up-votes and 17 replies). In this comment, the user, ‘Queen of Cutlets’, stakes their own claim on authenticity and Japanese culture:

Overacting to the max. That wasn’t awkward at all [...] I have mixed feelings about this. I didn’t understand a word and can’t find any lyrics, but after reading the comments, I feel like this might encourage people to make fun of us actual J-fashion wearers more than they already do. And the one’s who think this is unique and cool ppprrroobably havent seen where she got this from [...] cough-coughlolol But I could be wrong! (Queen of Cutlets, in Doprah 2014)

This comment provoked 17 replies, including several from Doprah’s singer Indira Force, who used her real name and not the band’s YouTube account. Force

engaged directly with the critical comments and refuted the accusations, thus offering a distinct degree of creator-viewer communication:

Interesting point—but what if it's actually really great that they are borrowing and taking inspiration from another culture? It shouldn't be something we are opposed to. As an actual J-fashion wearer you probably understand this super well. The popularity of this video shouldn't by any means encourage degradation of Japanese pop culture. (Indira Force, in Doprah 2014)

More than likely without the knowledge that the band's singer had in fact replied to the post, 'Queen of Cutlets' responded with: 'I wonder if "Doprah" actually KNOWS people in Japanese fashion, or just judged by what we seem to be? Honestly, it wouldn't be the first time.' To which Force replied: 'I used to cosplay myself. I went to Kyoto in Japan for three months when I was 16. I love anime, and adore Japanese culture – especially the traditional aspect. (I'm in Doprah)'. This effectively ended the discussion from this respondent.

On the other hand, 15 of the comments that identified Japanese cultural influences either praised the video and/or artists, or went so far as to defend their right to draw on Japanese culture. For example, the second most highly ranked comment on the YouTube site defended the band's integrity, their right to appropriate, and their right to make this claim:

To those that are saying it's "mocking" Kyary and [sic.] the fashion. That may be true OR maybe she is making a satire out of all of the people that mask themselves head-to-toe in something that they don't fully understand. You are being fooled by the video if you think she is attempting to be "original". The creepy, flowy, airiness of the whole thing brought me back to watch it again. I love Japanese fashion/Kyary, AND I can appreciate this video. (HappyChill, in Doprah 2014)

Regarding the video's Japanese cultural references, nine posts were made, but none overtly celebrate or criticise the video, with some simply saying: 'Reminds me of Kyary Pamyu Pamyu videos' (jeremy king); or 'Japan's just up north from New Zealand' (SilverStrumer). One commenter even characterised the way Japanese culture had been appropriated stating: 'its pretty Christchurch all at the same time. And I like it' (Julian Garrett). A total of 63 other unique comments praised the video and or song but did not identify or discuss appropriation practices. These included statements such as: 'Best song ever ever listened

to' (Alexander Taylor, in Doprah 2014); or 'i love this video' (yuli killdriot Ü). Countering this, seven comments were outright critical of the video, but did not state why, such as: 'ever wondered what played over the speakers in hell?' (Frank Scarpelli); or 'burn her with fire plz' (Viktor Thomas).

In addition to Japanese influences, several other influences were identified by users. Five comments thought the video resembled Bjork, two cited Kimbra, five mentioned Malanie Martinez (with some saying it reminded them both of Malanie Martinez and Kyari Pamyu Pamyu), and one commenter likened the video to Bjork meets the *kawaii* act AKB48, the latter, which we discuss later in the article, has been a recurring association from many perspectives in the making and consumption of the 'Stranger People' video. One user thought the video imagery resembled an Estonian artist named Kerli, while the song sounded like Maria Minerva, also from Estonia.

(RE-)WRITING CULTURE

During our interview with Steven Marr, just two months after the release of the 'Stranger People' video, he commented on the idea of cultural appropriation, possibly inspired after critical reflection of media and social media responses to the video and its exoticism. He said '[our appropriation] is not something that is surrounded by any kind of bad blood, compared to something like, white guys wearing the American Indian headdress at music festivals, where there is a lot of bad blood behind that' (Steven Marr, personal interview, 27 August 2014).¹⁰ Here, Marr dismisses any notion of controversy on the part of Doprah as being somewhat inflated by media and social media commentary, and insists that the only overtly negative response they had received was via a teen-cosplay forum: 'a lot of it are really angry thirteen year olds who do cosplay [because] someone posted on a cosplay forum, and made a lot of very upset thirteen year olds!' (Steven Marr, personal interview, 27 August 2014). Nonetheless, the video production company that made the video, Thunderlips, released a public statement outlining its stance on appropriation, which appeared two months after the video was made, and when media and social media responses on cultural appropriation began to appear. The statement by Thunderlips was posted on its Facebook page and reproduced on a number of blogs, and reads:

Our stance on cultural appropriation is that it's great, and in this case doubly great for creating a cycle of appropriation by appropriating from the greatest of cultural appropriators: the Japanese. They've borrowed from the West, and now we're re-borrowing their half-

borrowed medium – whose culture is really discernible in J-pop? It's an appropriated medium! The sitcom we made for Randa [a New Zealand hip-hop artist] is an equally blatant appropriation of a medium that originates in a culture that isn't ours. We dressed up as J-pop because of that medium's blatant production-line approach to music as commerce, with little consideration for the individuality of the people it packages. Western music can be blamed for the same thing to a lesser (or just less-obvious) extent – and that's the association we're trying to make. (Complex Media 2014)

This statement reinforces the perspective that because J-pop music includes elements that may have been absorbed into popular culture more broadly, so the video made by Thunderlips that includes Japanese imagery, was not unethical or offensive. While acknowledging the cultural flows that are often an inherent part of the production, distribution, and consumption of popular culture on a global level, and that such cultural forms are often far removed from sacred cultural traditions, the stance put forward by Thunderlips consolidates cultural borrowing as a creative norm. In her interview with the authors, Force also reiterates this point:

Using this [Japanese] imagery is barely unexpected, because the [global] music scene is becoming increasingly more interconnected; a shared, collaborative process. We can gain entirely new perspectives and take inspiration from other cultures, and it's crazy people all over the world [who] can recognise the same imagery. This is the process of unifying the music scene on a global scale, and the sharing of cultures should be celebrated. (Indira Force, email message to Wilson, 2 September 2015)

Appropriation has long been a concern for pop musicologists, ethnomusicologists, and others (e.g. Taylor 1997), and Doprah's response to criticism illustrates a perspective that promotes cultural borrowing (in this case imagery and not music) as a building block that contributes to a greater interconnectedness within the culture industry. However, such use of Japanese imagery relates to Said's (1979) notion of Orientalism, when it 'is descriptive not simply of a set of attitudes and sentiments by which the West knows the East, but, more complexly, of a mirroring process in which the West knows itself by what it is not' (Railton and Watson 2011, 110).

Doprah received funding from the government broadcast funding agency, New Zealand On Air, to produce 'Stranger People' through a Making Tracks grant,

which provides up to NZ\$6000 towards video production costs. After being awarded the funding, the band began discussing ideas with a number of different production companies. Impressed by their previous work, Doprah employed the directing duo Thunderlips (who comprise Sean Wallace and Jordan Dodson, and work alongside the New Zealand production company Candlelit Pictures) to take responsibility for all aspects of the video production. Outside of commissioning and starring in the video, the band had little to do with its production, mainly because they live in the city of Christchurch on the South Island of New Zealand, and the video makers are based in Auckland on the North Island, which is almost 1000 km away.

In our interview with Marr, he recalled that the idea of making what he perceived to be a J-pop style video was initially not a serious priority for the band: ‘we kind of just jokingly said let’s make a J-pop video because we were watching heaps of J-pop at the time and that just kinda stuck and they came back to us with this... [idea] in a whole lot more detail... that they thought reflected the song’ (Steven Marr, personal interview, 27 August 2014). While it is almost impossible to discern any sonic J-pop references in ‘Stranger People’, according to Marr, who, as he noted, is ‘definitely not an active J-pop listener’ (Steven Marr, personal interview, 27 August 2014), the Japanese idea came from the other band member, Indira Force who in 2013 had completed a three-month high school exchange in Kyoto, Japan. As Force comments, the Japanese contextualisation of the video was based on her recent viewing of J-pop videos:

I was watching like a lot of J-pop videos (predominantly artists such as Perfume and Kyary Pamyu Pamyu) and found myself wondering if we could create a video that eye-catching and truly bizarre—of course, it only seems bizarre to us because the culture is foreign. I thought if we could make something that strange and with that same very foreign edge, it would definitely catch people’s attention. (Indira Force, email message to Wilson, 2 September 2015)

It is here that one wonders if the title of the song was referred to in the video imagery, with a ‘foreign’ culture that may seem strange to most viewers. Force continued by explaining her affinity to Japanese culture:

As a teenager, I was initially really into watching anime (especially the famous series ‘Naruto’) and reading manga, the illustration and total fantasy world it provides was really appealing to me. I hung out with a group of friends who all dedicated their time to talking about and drawing manga; cosplaying at events and stuff. So it was

a big part of my life. (Indira Force, email message to Wilson, 2 September 2015)

Force further explains her affection for Japanese culture, pointing out characteristics that lead to creativity and as something that drew her in:

Japan also seems to exist on a whole other level to the rest of the world—they are by far one of the quirkiest, most fearlessly inventive cultures I have personally experienced—and that creativity and perspective is something a lot of western cultures seem to lack, simply due to the limitations of our own cultural perception—we need the perspective of Japanese culture in the world. It adds colour. (Indira Force, email message to Wilson, 2 September 2015)

After agreeing on the brief, the Thunderlips duo pondered over the J-pop idea for several months. The concept for the video was cemented after Thunderlips' co-director Sean Wallace discovered a viral YouTube video featuring a member of the all-female Japanese pop group *AKB48*. The video shows the member, Minegishi Minami, who had shaved her head as a way of attempting to 'save face', addressing the viewers while crying and appearing visibly ashamed (Shadbolt 2013). Wallace, who speaks Japanese, noted that the 20-year-old pop star was apologising for being caught having a relationship with a man, which went against the band's rules of maintaining an image of purity. Jordan explains that the *AKB48* apology video:

Led us to learning and thinking about how [...] the Japanese music machine [...] was a kind of very controlling industry that almost seemed to create products, to take a human being and turn them into something marketable and package them in a certain way and sell them, and we became really interested in the idea of people as objects [...] at the whim of the people who stood to make money from that persons singing voice or appearance. (Jordan Dodson, personal interview, 1 September 2014)

The *AKB48* event received some coverage from Western media outlets, such as CNN who framed the affair – and less directly Japanese culture – as exploitative of young girls, and describing *AKB48* as a 'music democracy that is minting money, and again, generating controversy' (Shadbolt 2013). The Thunderlips duo interpreted this situation as emblematic of how oppressive, dehumanising, and objectifying the entertainment industries are globally, and recognised that – as a consequence of the Western views towards J-pop as demonstrated in the

coverage of the AKB48 controversy – the J-pop genre could be mobilised as a symbol through which to critique the global industry, and thus established a theme for the ‘Stranger People’ video imagery. The AKB48 apology was seen by Dodson as a ‘microcosm, [and] as an amplified fairy-tale version of our own music industry in the West’ (Jordan Dodson, personal interview, 1 September 2014).

The AKB48 event also resonated with a theme that was identified in the lyrics of ‘Stranger People’, which was interpreted as expressing ‘wilful self delusion, where a person has gladly accepted a lie and induced a state of denial about their circumstance because it’s better and prettier that way’ (Jordan Dodson, personal interview, 1 September 2014). Indeed, Thunderlips wanted to express this contradiction visually as a ‘candy coated nightmare [...] the fundamental shape of it might be grotesque, but it’s hard to tell because it is so bright and sugary and colourful’ (Jordan Dodson, personal interview, 1 September 2014). The song-writing-credits are split between the two band members Force and Marr, whereby each member wrote the lyrics that they themselves perform on the recording, and they claim to have little to do with each other’s contribution. Marr confesses to the song being ‘almost kind of meaningless’ (Steven Marr, personal interview, 27 August 2014), citing themes of opportunities lost and regret, whereas Force sees the song as more sinister. As she explains: ‘When I wrote the song [...] my perspective on humanity was very much moulded into a cynical outlook [on] worldwide greed, of laziness and the multiples of unjust economical, cultural and environmental circumstances these traits caused’ (Indira Force, email message to Wilson, 2 September 2015). It was drawing on these broader ideas about control and oppression that culminated in Doprah’s J-pop parody as a tool for social commentary. As Force explains: ‘The J pop visuals were really a medium through which to convey the sinister lyrical content with themes and messages of denial, utopia/falsified environments and blissful ignorance’ (Indira Force, email message to Wilson, 2 September 2015). With such knowledge of Japanese pop culture, as well as ongoing media commentary, this study of different parameters involved in the production of the ‘Stranger People’ video helps show the extent to which the producers and marketing team have influence in constructing cultural meaning as a calculated part of the musical product.

In December 2014, several months after the release of ‘Stranger People’, the video’s producer, blogging under the name A R Duckworth (i.e., Anna Duckworth), along with production manager Rose Archer, published their own analysis of the video, and pinpointed specific meanings and messages to clues present in visual aspects of specific scenes. For example, one such clue is the

word *shitagae*, which translates as ‘obey’. The overall theme, according to Duckworth and Archer, revolves around ‘ideas of control, violence and conformity – through a thinly veiled cover of saccharine “cuteness”’ (Duckworth and Archer 2014). The blogger also states that the actions of the video’s main character reinforce such ideas, citing scenes where the main character (played by Force) threateningly holds a knife up to another doll, and ‘salutes’ the viewer. Duckworth and Archer also suggest that the choreography reinforces these themes, and, in describing certain dance moves, state that the ‘choreography represents a gagging and blindfolding of our character. Taking away her ability to think for herself or be aware of what is really going on around her’ (Duckworth and Archer 2014). Marr on the other hand, prefers to interpret the broader actions of the characters in his reading of the video, and does not focus solely on the overt Japanese symbolism. To that end, in our interview with him, Marr stated: ‘obviously, with the hand, being a controlling force, and pushing the doll into situations it doesn’t want to be in, and developing until it breaks’ (Steven Marr, personal interview, 27 August 2014).

DISCUSSION: THE INTENSIFIED POSTMODERN PARADIGM

Doprah’s ‘Stranger People’ video is an example of the way inherent imagery produces online discourse about popular music and the video medium. Media and online social media combine to influence and construct meaning about the video, and that meaning might be re-interpreted by the artists themselves as a direct result of the interaction between viewers and cultural producers. The immediacy of such influence and change is indicative of the way the modern era of music production, distribution, and consumption is influenced by media and social interaction, and intervention. In this context, the media and social media discourse that has been constructed as a result of the ‘Stranger People’ video exhibits two distinct themes that deserve further discussion: Japanese influences and appropriation.

The very notion of the band utilizing a J-pop imagery for the ‘Stranger People’ video exhibits Japanese influence in various ways. That is, one explanation noted above regarding the reasons for Doprah’s J-pop influence presented the idea that J-pop itself has been influenced by Western music. Here, it could equally be stated that Doprah’s influences from Japan have been part of a broader notion of contemporary cultural flows, which can be interpreted across several spheres.

The influence of Japan on global culture in recent decades has received much attention in scholarly discourse (e.g. Allen and Sakamoto 2006; Iwabuchi 2002,

2004; Novak 2013; Yano 2013). Whether through the automobile industry, martial arts, computer gaming, electronic products, or even sushi, Japan has had a highly visible impact on many spheres of globalisation. More specific to New Zealand and as per the area of focus for this article, the above list has impacted much on the daily lives of many in this nation state. Indeed, ‘Japanisation in New Zealand might be compared to Americanisation as a hegemonic force based on global economic wealth and power ([although] Japan’s globalisation differs to the USA in terms of the latter’s military presence and influence on many nations)’ (Johnson 2008, 116).

There are many examples of Western influences on Japanese pop music, such as the Japanese adoption of Western pop music styles, the use of English in some pop lyrics, and the consumption of global pop in Japan (e.g. Mitsui 1997; Nyman 2012). When the cultural context is reversed, one might ask: Are there any Japanese influences in Western popular music? Restricting the study to the commercial popular music that has been the foundation of much European and North American popular culture since the 1950s, one can find several examples of Japanese pop musicians succeeding to varying extents in the West. For example, Sakamoto Kyū’s ‘Sukiyaki’ (1963), but most obvious is the occasional characterisation or essentialisation of Japanese culture in Western pop songs such as ‘Turning Japanese’ by The Vapors (1980), Avril Lavigne’s ‘Hello Kitty’ (2013), or Gwen Stefani’s ‘Harajuku Girls’ (2004). In other instances, it is the inclusion of Japanese traditional instruments like the *koto* in songs such as David Bowie’s ‘Moss Garden’ (1977) and A Taste of Honey’s ‘Sukiyaki’ (1980) (see Linhart 2009).

The ‘Stranger People’ video offers two distinct perspectives on aspects of Japanese popular culture: on the one hand there are distinct visual references to Japanese popular culture, yet on the other, the video is a text that is also a reaction to such influences. The visual influences include a range of cultural items, including artefacts and ideas from popular culture that point to the notion of *kawaii* (Host 2015; Pham 2015). These include bright colours and toys (especially soft toys), each of which is also exhibited in *kawaii* music videos that are a part of modern-day J-pop (Allison 2006). “Millennial monsters” such as Pokémon and toys like the Tamagotchi reflected the absorption of Japanese cultural forms into “enchanted commodities” of lexible capitalism, which triggered a wave of participatory identification among postindustrial youth in the United States (Allison 2006)’ (Novak 2013, 25–26). Further, there is also the overall aspect of the video, which offers a parody of the visual imagery (not the musical sound) of Japanese pop star Kyari Pamyu Pamyu’s ‘Ponponpon’ video of 2011, itself featuring similar bright colours and toys as found in the ‘Stranger

People' video. As noted by Kyari Pamyu Pamyu, who actually portrays an image of ambiguous ethnicity through the use of make-up and various coloured wigs, the nature of her video is not just about offering imagery of the notion of *kawaii*, but there is also an inherent parody in her own visual representations. She notes, 'I love grotesque things. My concept is scary things that become traumatic with their cuteness. There are so many "just cute" things in the world, so I add grotesque, scary and even shocking materials like eyeballs and brains to balance out the cuteness' (Kyari Pamyu Pamyu, cited in Cooper and Masuda 2013). It is such cultural associations that contribute to locate 'Stranger People' within a complex global network of pop culture where orientalism is found in various dimensions and settings, and where cultural appropriation is offered in the music industry as a product of pop consumption with deeper levels of cultural meaning obfuscated by fashion.

As part of our analysis of the Japanese cultural influences on the 'Stranger People' video, we decided to seek perspectives on its reception by tertiary students in New Zealand and Japan. We conducted a short survey and gathered responses to the video in an attempt to interpret how and why Japanese cultural influences were such contested points in the intertextual construction of meaning around the 'Stranger People' video. Nearly all the Japanese students made comparisons between the clothing worn by Doprah and Kyari Pamyu Pamyu, and referenced Harajuku fashion. However, in general, as one student said, it was 'only a poor attempt to making it look like Japanese'. While another student likened the video to *kawaii* culture, cosplay, and the notion of *shitagae*, the main singer didn't look Japanese because she had big eyes. Overall, most students found it 'weird' or 'scary', and some even stated that 'the sound is terrible' and 'I don't want to see it again'. However, when asked to respond to the same questions when viewing Avril Lavigne's 'Hello Kitty' video of 2013, this song was linked to being 'cool', '*kawaii*', and 'cool Japan'. It was 'good because [it was by a] famous artist' and 'it's funny. I know she loves Japan'. 'I like it because it is very cool and modern! I want to sing at karaoke!' The New Zealand students thought the 'Stranger People' video had some Japanese elements, and most did not think the singer looked Japanese, apart from her clothes and makeup. A few noted some Japanese connections such as cuteness, some of the objects used in the video, and anime, and there was an occasional reference to J-pop or 'Ponponpon'. In general, the following terms featured most in the comments: 'humorous', 'weird', 'unsettling', 'bizarre', and 'dolls'. Just as the Japanese students found the video somewhat strange, the New Zealand-based students had similar thoughts, with one summarising the overall sentiment by saying it was 'creepy but entertaining'.

In this context, therefore, the 'Stranger People' video was inspired by aspects of Japanese pop culture in a variety of ways. Force had visited Japan for several months as a high-school student and had obviously been captivated by Japanese society and culture. She was also an avid consumer of J-pop videos, which are cultural products sold on a global level. Many of the numerous child-like objects featured in the video are available around the world as part of the global consumerism that is inherent in pop culture. To this extent, Doprah has been a consumer of parts of Japanese pop culture, and used such objects as a part of its cultural expression in the New Zealand setting, but with the release of the video via YouTube the audience has been potentially more global.

Within this context of Japanese cultural flows, Doprah was both influenced by, and used imagery from, Japanese pop culture within a paradigm of cultural borrowing, which was interpreted by some media and social media viewers as cultural appropriation. The band and the video production team responded by reinforcing the idea that Doprah was actually 'borrowing and taking inspiration from another culture' (Indira Force, in Doprah 2014). Force pointed out that she had spent time in Japan, consumed J-pop, and dressed the part in Japanese pop culture, thus raising questions about cultural ownership in a pop culture context grounded in mass global flows in the production of consumer products – in this case an online, freely available video. Indeed, 'Stranger People' has no discernible musical references to Japanese culture, and while the imagery offers a parody, the artists claim 'inspiration', and the producers state the video 'is representing ideas of control, violence and conformity' (Duckworth and Archer 2014).

According to Dodson from Thunderlips, the New Zealand music industry is inevitably part of the broader Western (global) music industry, so he believes that making generalisations about the way the New Zealand music industry works, as the 'Stranger People' video attempts to do, is not monolithic or problematic. Dodson explains: 'we as an industry are just an extension of the other Western music industries [...] it's just Japanese culture versus the West and we are just aligning ourselves with the rest of the West' (Jordan Dodson, personal interview, 1 September 2014). Furthermore, the Japanese style was understood to be 'used as a way to draw attention to our own failures to respect human individuality, and to commercialise it and change people' (Jordan Dodson, personal interview, 1 September 2014). Dodson contends that although symbols of New Zealand culture were 'entirely left out of the video', and the video making process was 'extremely New Zealand in its ethos' (meaning they were able to make it on a very small budget), he explains that 'there is a lot of generosity in the film industry here where everyone comes to the party and offers

equipment and stuff for extremely reduced rates' (Jordan Dodson, personal interview, 1 September 2014).

CONCLUSION

The 'Stranger People' video can be seen as an object and site of polysemic meaning as music video interacts with online media. Within this frame of reference, the production, distribution, and consumption of video now includes a significant intertextual discourse that is not only constructed as part of the video's location for dissemination (e.g. YouTube), but may have been enmeshed in cultural knowledge that has been created through media and social media response as well. While this discourse helps create meaning for fans and artists, the artefact is further developed when artists interact with the viewers (who are not necessarily fans). This process raises questions of power relations between performers, producers, and consumers. What the article has shown is that online social media offers a degree of immediacy and ongoing influence in the construction of intertextual meaning. Such virtual social spaces and musical artefacts move beyond models that measure the consumption of music and offer instead a context where an object's meaning can be part of a socially interactive process of production where consumers can practice greater authority over the artefact being consumed.

As a site for the scholarly analysis of the production of meaning surrounding one particular online music video, this discussion has reflected on Japanese imagery as found in video imagery, and media and social media responses to that imagery – but not the music. The 'Stranger People' video was a one-off visual portrayal and parody of aspects of Japanese popular (*kawaii*) culture as a 'souvenir of the exotic' (Stewart 1993, 146). With the immediacy of media and online social media, viewers, performers, and video producers have been able to construct an ongoing discourse around the video. Through social response and explanation, and in a somewhat ironic way, this has actually helped reinforce how the contemporary era of music video consumption can help construct musical meaning through an intensification of the production and distribution of postmodern discourse.

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NOTES

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3. The name of the band is a pun on the word ‘dope’ and the name the US chat-show host, Oprah Winfrey. This combination is further evident in part of the band’s web address on Facebook: ‘doprahwinfrey’.
4. Doprah’s Facebook page notes that the band was ‘born on May 31, 2013’ (Doprah 2015b). While Doprah as a song writing outfit are centred on the duo Steven John Marr and Indira Force, for live performances they extend their membership to include Symon Palmer, Hunter Jackson, Ryan Chin, and Matthew Gunn, and continuing their somewhat satirical theme, named Marr’s cat Sagan Gunnforce-marrcraw as one of the band’s members (Doprah 2015b).
5. Kyari Pamyu Pamyu is the stage name of Takemura Kiriko (b. 1993).
6. Doprah had already achieved two No. 1 singles in New Zealand in the alternative scene (New Zealand Music Commission 2014).
7. The page provides the option to view comments either from most popular to least, or from most recent to least.
8. At the time of writing, the ‘San Pedro’ video had received just over 26,000 views on YouTube, 272 likes and 10 dislikes.

9. Of these, 27 were overtly critical comments (mostly of the band's appropriation practices), 78 positive and supportive, and the remaining 49 appeared to be neither celebratory nor critical, or were nonsensical.
10. Marr was referring to the widespread criticism in 2014 of Native American head-dresses being worn out of context at music festivals, thus appropriating an indigenous sacred tradition.

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