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ANALYZING THE REASONS FOR THE GLOBAL POPULARITY OF BTS: A NEW APPROACH FROM A BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the reasons for the global popularity of the Korean boy band BTS that has been at the center of the growing popularity of Korean pop music or K-pop. To address this issue more comprehensively, this paper utilizes a framework derived from a business approach which has been so far little attempted. In contrast from existing studies that focus on fandom and its activities, this paper argues that instead of egocentric strategies, sophisticated consumer-oriented strategies by utilizing internationalization and digitization are the key to its global popularity, which have helped BTS and their managing company Big Hit Entertainment to overcome all the disadvantages they faced before while reinforcing exiting advantages and creating new ones. By doing so, BTS has gained their global success and become Korea's top boy band.

Key Words: BTS, Bangtan Boys, Bangtan Sonyeondan, K-pop, Hallyu, Korean music industry

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the world's cultural hegemony has shifted from Europe to the United States led by its audio-visual industries. Naturally, the linguistic hegemony in these cultural industries has also shifted to English from non-English European languages such as French or Italian while the ethnological dominance continued to be "white Caucasian." It was widely believed that this cultural landscape would not change for the foreseeable future, however the global emergence of Korean pop culture has challenged such perceptions. This development becomes a worthy topic that requires further analyses as most of its products feature the Korean language and its people. To gain a clearer perspective, this paper tackles this issue from a business perspective with focus on BTS or Bangtan Boys, a seven-member Korean boy band that has recently gained global popularity.

When Korean cultural products such as dramas, films, and popular songs began to emerge in the international market in the late 1990s, this phenomenon attracted close attention from around the world. One of the critical reasons for this interest is that Korea had long been regarded as a periphery in the global cultural industries (Otmazgin and Lyan, 2014; Yang, 2012). In fact, its rapid success led to a number of scholars and commentators dismissing this phenomenon as simply an unsustainable fad. Furthermore, many regarded its coverage as mostly limited to East and Southeast Asia where Confucian values or other cultural traits are shared (Ha, 2017; Kim, 2007). Yet the developments in the last few years have been in stark contrast to such viewpoints, as a large number of Korean dramas have been exported to more countries, Korean films have received several prestigious international film awards, and Korean pop music or K-pop has gained more international popularity across a diverse range of countries.

Among these three, K-pop has in 2020 been catching great attention among international media outlets due to two key events. First, it was widely reported by the media that K-pop fans had taken over the #whitelivesmatter hashtag on Twitter by posting images of K-pop singers and bands in the early June as part of the Black Lives Matter protests (Aswad, 2020). Second, the boy band BTS took over the top spot on the Billboard Hot 100 for the first time since their debut with the song "Dynamite." This smash hit has also topped the iTunes Top Song charts in 104 countries following its release in August 2020 (Savage, 2020). These two events create a wide range of topics for academic discussion and analysis.

More importantly, they demonstrate the continuous and increasing global popularity of K-pop across the world.

So far, there has been a number of studies that have analyzed the global emergence of K-pop and/or the Korean music industry. While these studies provide meaningful findings and implications, there are still few academic endeavors that have focused on BTS and their global popularity. Among the small number of studies on this subject, most deal with fandom and its supporting activities as will be shown later in the literature review. In this regard, a different view using a business perspective can be beneficial toward understanding more comprehensively how BTS has emerged globally (Parc, 2018). This can be a complementary asset to the prevailing fandom-focused research while enriching studies on the (Korean) music industry, particularly about BTS.

To address this issue, this paper consists of the following sections. The first covers the literature review on the emergence of the band. The second provides background information on BTS in order for readers to comprehend better the analysis of this paper. The third delineates the theoretical framework and methodology that are utilized in this study. Based on the previous section, an in-depth analysis is conducted in the fourth section. The fifth section discusses the implications drawn from the analysis of the previous sections and other related issues. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings of this paper and suggests areas for possible further study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus in the international media on BTS has been very recent, reflecting the fact that their global emergence began in 2015. This indicates how relatively new this topic is in academia and why the literature on the topic is still in its early stages. So far, much of the media in the US and Europe have underscored the enthusiastic and devoted support expressed by their international fandom known as the ARMY or Adorable Representative MC for Youth as it has been known for its various on and offline activities including flash mob gatherings, producing BTS-related content, tweeting news about BTS, mass watching BTS music videos on YouTube, creating trending BTS hashtags, collective voting on music charts such as Billboard, and various forms of charitable work. For this reason, the main focus of academia has been on the fandom studies.

Among some of the notable literature, Lee (2018) is one of the first dealing with fandom to explain why BTS has become so influential. She mentions that the group's

managing company Big Hit Entertainment (hereafter Big Hit) was not a major company and had weak media power in Korea; hence, BTS has to be more competent than their rivals to survive in the harsh Korean entertainment industry. On top of this, she highlights the unique relationship between BTS and the ARMY that has been established from its emergence through social networks and internet platforms.

Crucially, she points out that the lyrics of BTS consist of stories and issues – harsh school life, social inequality, unjustified stereotypes, anxieties in the real world which have been structured by the established (or neo-liberal) order – that appeal to young generations. Through this sympathy, a very special intimate relationship has formed between BTS and the ARMY. Between these two, there is no organizational structure, hierarchical order, or specific center. Through online contact, BTS and the ARMY interact with each other and continuously create concepts and values that can be transformed into new art and culture. In her analysis, she connects this special relationship with the concept of rhizome, which was developed by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze.

In the same vein, Lee, J. (2019) focuses on the fandom of BTS in her archive-like monograph. By illustrating many specific cases in detail, she describes how BTS and the ARMY have interacted to establish their own intimate relationship. She argues that the ARMY supports BTS, not because it is a K-pop band but because their music carries meaningful and positive messages for their followers. Such a fandom is then inspired and willing to share this message with others. To this end, they upload video clips of BTS with hashtags, vote for them in prestigious music charts, and request radio stations to play these songs.

More importantly, she argues that BTS has all the minority elements such as non-English speaking, Asian, and boy band. In this regard, people who claim to support BTS and listen to their music have experienced discrimination from their peers for enjoying a different musical taste. These fans then have a chance to consider the experiences of other social minorities. This has excelled their support for BTS and other charitable campaigns in a diverse manner. Interestingly, she presents that this kind of fandom culture is not unique for BTS, but also exists for other musicians such as Ariana Grande, Beyoncé, One Direction, and Shawn Mendes, although it is more limited to online streaming.

McLaren and Jin (2020) focus on transnational and transcultural flows of hybridized popular culture in an era of new media technologies. They argue that the popularity of BTS can be explored in the context of social media usage among fans and in their identification with BTS through the band's online content, music, and image of authenticity. Like Lee

(2018) and Lee, J. (2019), McLaren and Jin (2020) point out the special relationship between BTS and their fans that has been established through social media. With this, they argue that hybridized popular culture is circulated not only through transnational flows of content but also with transcultural constructions of affective investment and identity.

Lee, M. (2019) and Yoon (2019) share the same view on fandom as the aforementioned literature. However, they highlight more the existence of the storytelling strategy. By engaging in albums, music videos, webtoons, and short films, BTS has established more elaborate and multi-layered narratives in which the band creates its content. This is known as the BTS Universe, often shortened to BU; this concept is similar to the Marvel Universe, a fictional world where most stories from the American comic books take place. This has attracted more fans for BTS, resulting in an increase in their global popularity.

All of the precedent literature is meaningful to explain the global emergence of BTS. At the same time, this topic requires a critical assessment. First, before this close relationship between BTS and their fans was formed, how did people come to know about the band and listen to their music, and what was their first point of access toward discovering them? Second, knowing that a storytelling strategy can be copied by others, what has made people want to become specifically a fan of BTS? Third, given that other (K-pop) bands also have supportive fandom, why has the ARMY pursued a more interactive relationship with BTS? Last, why has BTS used a wider range of media devices to promote the band? All of these questions should be examined in order to better understand the global emergence of BTS.

THE BACKGROUND STORY OF BTS

In order to understand more clearly about the global popularity of BTS, it is necessary to examine its background and history, particularly with a focus on Big Hit. BTS debuted on June 13, 2013 and was originally focused on producing and performing hardcore hip-hop music. Interestingly, before their debut, BTS actively uploaded a large number of video blogs (vlogs) and related dance rehearsal videos on social media in order for the public to become more aware of the band. Here, it is important to point out that the domestic popularity of this group was limited despite these efforts, and this signifies that social media by itself cannot fully explain the emergence and popularity of K-pop, notably BTS. In fact, one of the core issues was that their musical style was far from the tastes of the average Korean consumer at that time.

Around the same time, Big Hit was involved in producing another hip-hop band called GLAM which consisted of five girls and made their official debut in June 2012. Two years later a scandal surrounding GLAM erupted in relation to one of the group's members who blackmailed Korea's leading actor Lee Byung-hun. The subsequent court case and guilty ruling placed Big Hit under great constraint as it lost a chance to collect a significant amount of revenues from GLAM's expected success and therefore faced with a large amount of debt. It was clear that these conditions made it difficult for Big Hit to promote its singers and bands. As a result, Korean media outlets placed an unofficial boycott on any singers or bands from Big Hit after the scandal broke out; this is hinted at with the BTS song "Sea (바다, bada)," which is the second hidden track on *Love Yourself 承 'Her'* and only available on the physical album. This may explain why during their early days the appearance of BTS in the Korean media was very limited.¹ It is worth pointing out that another song "Move (이사, isa)," which was released in 2015, describes the difficulties they faced during that time.

Eventually BTS enjoyed their first breakthrough and commercial success in 2015 following the release of the Youth series known as HYYH (*Hwa Yang Yeon Hwa* or *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life*) trilogy, which demonstrated the evolving musical style from solely hip-hop to a wide range of genres.² Alongside this change in music, they shifted away from simple episodes to more elaborate storylines and multi-layered narratives as they set out to create the BTS Universe. Given that the title for *Hwa Yang Yeon Hwa* was inspired by the famous Hong Kong film *In the Mood for Love*, this series was aimed at the Chinese market, which along with Japan was a profitable location for K-pop bands. However, the Chinese government began to signal that it would close its market to K-pop in 2016 due to the diplomatic dispute over the deployment of the US THAAD missile defense system in Korea.³ Following the THAAD crisis, BTS was one of the first K-pop bands that actively turned to the US market, which is the largest and the most influential in the world.

¹ It is also important to note that Big Hit was a small company when compared with other major entertainment companies such as SM, YG, and JYP although its CEO Bang Si-hyuk was a well-known figure in the Korean music industry. Therefore, it can be easily assumed that this company has weak bargaining power vis-à-vis the main Korean TV channels as well as other media outlets in the early years of BTS.

² The Korean title of *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life* is *Hwanyangyeonhwa* (화양연화). This was influenced by the famous film that has the same title in Korean and was directed by the leading Hong Kong film director Wong Kar-wai. The English title for this movie though is different, *In the Mood for Love* (2000).

³ On July 8, 2016, the Korean government agreed to host the deployment of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD). This decision provoked China to restrict the import of a wide variety of cultural goods from Korea including music and films since 2017.

BTS made their debut in the US with the leading song “DNA” at the 2017 American Music Awards. Together with the great support of the ARMY, this Korean boy band won the 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020 Billboard Awards for Top Social Artist beating well-known Western pop artists such as Ariana Grande, Justin Bieber, and Selena Gomez. They have been invited to the American Music Awards, Grammy Awards, and other well-known American TV talk shows such as *Ellen DeGeneres Show*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, and *The Late Late Show With James Corden*, as well as *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*. In addition, BTS even performed several times on *Dick Clark’s New Year’s Rockin’ Eve* which is a famous annual television event in the US.

In the online space, BTS has been the most tweeted celebrities across the globe since 2017 (Aniftos, 2017). Forbes named BTS the world’s highest paid boy band in 2019 (Voytko, 2020) and this band recently tied the Beatles’ record by earning three Billboard No. 1 albums in one year. On August 21, 2020, BTS finally released their first English-language single “Dynamite,” which broke the YouTube record for not only being the most viewed video in the first 24 hours but also being the first video on the platform to surpass a 100 million views within the first 24 hours (Porterfield, 2020). To cap this all off, the single debuted at number one on the US Billboard Hot 100 chart.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The critical literature review demonstrates the need for a broader view toward understanding the global emergence of BTS. To pursue such a rigorous framework that has a solid theoretical basis, it is important to recognize that the emergence of K-pop is very much related to digitization which has been led by rapid advancements in technology and the advent of the Internet (Jin, 2016; Parc, 2019a, 2019b; Parc, Messerlin, and Moon, 2016). In this regard, the approach introduced by Parc and Kawashima (2018) and Parc and Kim (2020) are very pertinent. This was derived from a business analytical tool known as the diamond approach which was developed by Porter (1990). In later years, Moon, Rugman, and Verbeke (1998) extended it further by incorporating international activities.

This framework focuses on the basic principles such as how to produce better (or more appealing) music, how to distribute it more widely, how to consume more efficiently, and how to manage all of these functions more effectively. In order to deal with this comprehensiveness, the framework has four factors: distributors, producers, consumers, and business context (see Table 1). Each factor has two sub-factors which are distinguished

by the level of their sophistication in the different period. The less sophisticated one (upper sub-factor for each factor) appears when the Internet was introduced while the more sophisticated one (lower sub-factor for each factor) emerges when the Internet becomes routinized for everyday life; *distributors* have “hardware” and “software”; *producers* have “basic” and “advanced”; *consumers* have “size” and “quality”; and *business context* has “structure” and “synergy.”

Table 1. Dynamic framework of music industry

Factor	Sub-factors	Changes
Distributors	Hardware	Analog → Digital
	Software	Domestic providers → International suppliers
Producers	Basic	Offline → Online
	Advanced	Audio sound → Visual images
Consumers	Size	Album (bundle of songs) → Song (a piece of music)
	Quality	Possessing → Accessing
Business context	Structure	Specialization → Integration
	Synergy	Limited interaction → Synergetic network

Source: Parc and Kim (2020); Improved based on Parc and Kawashima (2018)

Hardware in distributors is the way music is distributed in the course of changes from analog to digital. Software implies how music is distributed through the Internet and online platforms, particularly from domestic to international setting. Basic in producers signifies the changes of music production to make it better and more appealing when transformation from offline to online takes place. Advanced in producers indicates how to produce more attractive music that led to form a wide range of strong fandom; with smart devices the current change is from audio sound to visual images. While consumers suggest the way people enjoy music, size is music consumption in quantity whereas quality is music consumption in quality from various perspectives. Business context is about how to facilitate all the activities in a more effective way. Finally, structure of business context is about the level of integration while synergy means the level of synergy that can be brought about by various business activities.

These four factors reinforce, interact, and affect one another to optimize their operations to strengthen and/or create (new) advantages while overcoming disadvantages; which eventually contribute to enhanced overall competitiveness. When these four factors

foster the most favorable environment, a music industry is likely to succeed in the global market. By utilizing this framework, the link between cause and effect, which can explain how advantages can be created, enhanced, and sustained in a given environment, can be comprehensively and systematically explained.

This framework has been utilized in order to analyze the transformation of the Korean music industry to explain why K-pop has emerged in the global market (Parc and Kim, 2020) and also to compare different business strategies of J-pop and K-pop that have faced the same global digitization but with different outcomes (Parc and Kawashima, 2018). Therefore, this framework is useful to analyze the global popularity of BTS.

As described before, the literature on the reasons for the global popularity of BTS is rather scarce. This paper therefore provides a better understanding on the issue by not just offering new information, but also delivering a comprehensive and systematic explanation. As such, this paper utilizes extensively the audio-visual contents that BTS has published on and offline as well as existing studies that have scattered information about BTS. As this paper analyzes the reasons for the global popularity of BTS by using a business analytical tool, it is rather qualitative and descriptive.

ANALYSIS: GLOBAL POPULARITY OF BTS

In order to better understand the global popularity of BTS, it is very important to acknowledge the tremendous efforts among precedent K-pop bands and singers as well as people in the Korean music industry. In particular, the continuous endeavors – to overcome various hardships and difficulties and to seek out new advantages facing changes that internationalization and digitization have brought in – should be adequately considered as fundamental forces that have enabled BTS to emerge as a globally successful player. It is also worth remembering that BTS had modest domestic popularity in their early days. Hence, a contrast between the situation before and after their emergence helps provide a more meaningful analysis.

Distributors

As happened in the Korean music industry during the late 1990s, the distribution of music has changed from physical albums to MP3 files or online streaming (Parc and Kawashima, 2018). At the same time, appearances on media coverage, particularly on TV channels, are very important in order to gain strong popularity (Parc and Kim, 2020). However, BTS

experienced difficulties to gain access to these outlets, particularly in the wake of the GLAM scandal. In order to find a way to overcome it, they have actively utilized internet platforms such as V Live, a Korean live video streaming service which allows celebrities to broadcast live video and participate in live chat with fans on the Internet. Many of these live video chats have been recorded by fans and these video clips have been distributed through international internet platforms such as YouTube.

As mentioned above, BTS and their managing company have not been afraid of utilizing the Internet or online streaming platforms. Their music has been widely available through international service providers such as YouTube, iTunes, and Spotify. In addition, each member of BTS has released their individual mixtapes online where any consumer can download them freely without any charge (see Figure 1). Interestingly, these songs achieved strong success in the online music charts that count the number of streams and downloads. This practice has helped to function as a promotional tool for the regular albums. BTS and Big Hit even uploaded comeback trailers of new songs in order to promote them before their release.

Figure 1. Big Hit's links for free mixtapes

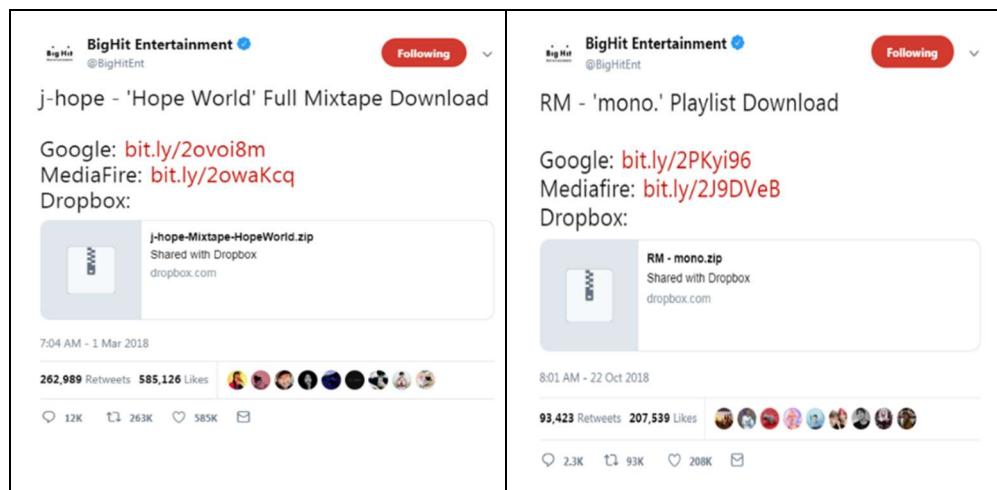
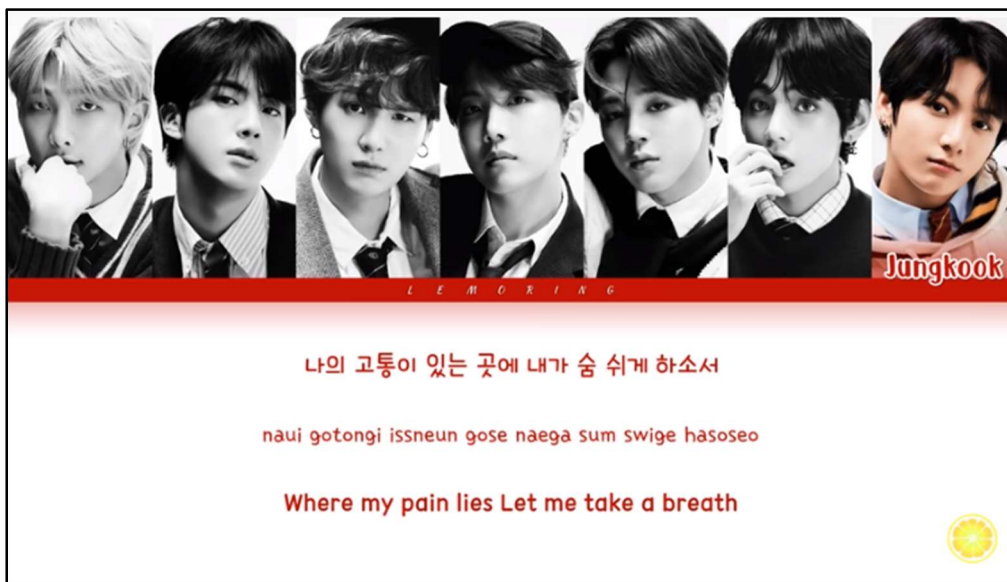


Image source: Big Hit Entertainment (2018) on Twitter

The distribution of (relevant) contents is not only done by BTS and Big Hit, but also by their fandom and the ARMY. The BTS fandom actively create and share their reaction videos on YouTube as they watch the band's newly released songs despite the fact that this activity does not render any financial reward. Particularly, there are a number of fans who

have dedicated their endeavors to make special video clips in order to show the meaning of the Korean lyrics and translation of them into English, coupled with the Romanization of Korean lyrics (see Figure 2). Here, it is important to highlight the fact that most user-created contents, including what even individual BTS members have produced, are not subject to strict copyrights; therefore, they can be widely diffused without much constraint. This is very different from how the precedent K-pop was distributed online. Through this, fans of BTS around the world are able to understand the lyrics and sympathize them with what BTS sings. It has also enabled fans to sing along with the band at their concerts. Obviously, this creates a close kinship among consumers with BTS regardless of linguistic barriers that K-pop bands generally have faced when going abroad.

Figure 2. Example of video for BTS lyrics



Notes: 1. The lyrics are on the bottom of the video clip. The first line is in Korean, the second is the Romanization of the Korean lyrics, and the last is the translation of the words into English; 2. The photo of a member who sings the relevant part appears in color; the presented lyric is part of Jungkook in this image.
Image source: Lemorning (2:49, 2020) on YouTube; based on a content administered by Big Hit

Producers

Like other K-pop groups, BTS engages in highly synchronized group dance that Korean consumers favor. However, when it comes to music, they only perform hardcore hip-hop music and have often expressed outspoken criticism on Korean society and Korean (high)

school life as well as everyday general issues. This is well reflected in the school trilogy that was released throughout 2013 and 2014. Contrary to their expectations, this series demonstrated only modest success in Korea due to its use of hardcore hip-hop music which were far from the taste of Korean consumers at the time and themes that appealed to a narrow and specific segment of consumers. Thus, Big Hit and BTS had to find solutions to overcome these issues.

As BTS had difficulties in promoting their music in Korea, the band and Big Hit sought to expand their coverage to large neighboring markets such as China and Japan with their second album series entitled youth trilogy since 2015. Through this series they softened their hardcore hip-hop sound while augmenting musical melodies and enhancing the lyricism of their songs. Additionally, in using the title of the famous Hong Kong film *Huayang Nianhua* (花樣年華, *In the Mood for Love*, 2000) for the album title, BTS looked to appeal to a wide audience in Asia. All of these efforts were widely accepted; thus, they could achieve their true mainstream breakthrough. Along with this achievement, BTS began to utilize strong visual images by associating specific colors and objects to each member throughout the storylines of their music videos and albums.

Despite their success in Asia, BTS had to change their consumer target toward markets outside of China due to the unfavorable diplomatic situation brought on by the THAAD issue which emerged in late 2016 (refer to Footnote 3). With the release of their WINGS and the Love Yourself series, BTS began to tackle the US market, which is the most influential and largest in the world. In order to appeal widely to American consumers, BTS and Big Hit utilized a similar strategy with the youth trilogy for the Chinese market. The Wings series is based on *Demian* (1919) by Hermann Hesse, the album *You Never Walk Alone* is similar to the well-known British song "You'll Never Walk Alone" (1963), the song *Blood, Sweat, and Tears* (2016) is in fact the name of a popular North American jazz-rock music group from the 1970s, while the title of the third trilogy is same as Justin Bieber's song "Love Yourself" (2015). The latest series *Map of the Soul* deals with psychological concepts developed by Carl Jung, and the most recent song "Dynamite" (2020) is a tribute to Michael Jackson. This strategy makes not only young fans but also older figures in American broadcasting networks feel familiar with the songs of BTS, which facilitates the penetration of BTS into the US market. Coupled with this strategy, BTS has engaged in a large number of collaborations with Western artists such as The Chainsmokers, Desiigner, Halsey, Lauv, Nicki Minaj, and Steve Aoki to appeal to the fandoms of these well-established artists while expanding the range of their own musical genres.

Consumers

With the advent of the Internet and technological advancement, music consumption has shifted from purchasing albums to collecting songs (IPSOS and IFPI, 2016; Parc and Kawashima, 2018; Parc and Kim, 2020). In recent years, this has evolved even further. It is not just albums or songs that increase the popularity of bands and signers, but also other derived contents, particularly those that can be made widely available online (Railton and Watson, 2011). As mentioned before, BTS had difficulties to promote the band through conventional media outlets in the early period, which pushed them to use more actively social media and internet platforms. A key example in this case was the videos of their dance rehearsals that they uploaded onto the Internet. A number of consumers have noticed that some BTS members have had a hard time in learning their dance moves, but eventually they improved significantly through hard training, ceaseless effort, and endless practice. While this may have revealed that they were “not” talented, it has delivered a positive message to their fans that “if you work hard, you can do it.”

As BTS diverged from hardcore hip-hop, the main themes have also changed from solely harsh criticism about school and society to positive themes related to overcoming hardships, particularly with support they have received from the ARMY. Naturally, inappropriate words and expressions have been restrained in their music, which is distinctively different from the works of other Western, notably American musicians. Furthermore, while others often show off images of a glamorous lifestyle with expensive cars and other luxurious items, BTS and their music videos do not explicitly display such content. Consumers, especially the young generations, may have once hankered for such a luxurious life that they can hardly reach, but this display of wealth eventually creates some distance between the audience and these flamboyant stars.

Due to these differences between BTS and others musicians, audiences who have experienced hardships in their life feel a sense of kinship with BTS who had also undergone difficult times. This shared feeling has evolved into a form of “groupism” among young consumers which led to the strong fandom for BTS, such as the ARMY. This encouraging message was clearly expressed in the remarks by Kim Nam-joon known as RM, the leader of BTS at the launch of Generation Unlimited at the UN General Assembly in 2018 (refer to UNICEF [2018]). In the end, the way fans enjoy music has evolved from possessing albums and accessing music to sympathizing with their favorite bands. For this reason, BTS and the ARMY have a tight connection where they have greatly supported each other, particularly through online communications (Chang and Park, 2019).

Business context

As Big Hit experienced a number of difficulties in the early 2010s and BTS was unable to gain widespread media coverage, promoting this band became a delicate task. In addition, this company had serious financial problems that hampered these efforts. Therefore, in order to overcome these disadvantages, all the relevant activities to produce music had to be undertaken within the company; thus, an “unwilling” lean integration took place instead of specialization, which became beneficial in the end. This constraint also pushed each member of BTS to actively participate in producing music and designing concepts of albums and music videos with other artists. This has allowed BTS and Big Hit to produce diligently many appealing songs in diverse styles within a short term. This explains why many in-house songwriters were engaged to produce songs – that mixed a number of different genres – for BTS. In fact, this kind of production system is required in the era of digitization when mass consumption of diverse genres exists (Parc and Kim, 2020).

This constraint has also induced a close and lean relationship (or system) with a few companies, such as Lumpens and GDW to produce elaborate music videos for BTS. Through this intimate relationship, the themes of the BTS Universe and the band’s distinctive style could have been maintained over the course of different trilogies. While the continuity among songs and albums has been kept within BTS Universe, the “esoteric” integration of Big Hit and other collaborators has made BTS confident enough to be experimental and embrace exotic and/or foreign elements regardless of what these are. For example, the Japanese versions of BTS’s music videos are based on the same plot lines as in the original versions, but they feature slightly different items; such a close attention to detail encourages BTS fans to theorize more deeply the possible storylines within the BTS Universe. The other example is the use of a wide range of sound elements such as the BTS song “Idol” (2018) which features a traditional Korean beat based on the South African house music genre *gqom* (Chakraborty, 2018; Kim, 2020b).

More recently, this integration has further extended overseas in order to enhance a global synergetic network. For instance, BTS collaborated with MN Dance Company from Slovenia for an art film in support of the song “Black Swan” (2020) and with Blue Devils Drum and Bugle Corps from California for the song “ON” (2020). BTS and Big Hit have made great efforts to produce works that meet the expectations of their fans as a pop band, while trying to widen their artistic exploration as an artist group. In this regard, BTS and Big Hit have launched a global project “Connect, BTS” in 2020 to collaborate with international artists, which is expected to bring about further synergies to BTS.

Assessment of the strategic changes

By utilizing the dynamic framework of the music industry, the reasons for the global popularity of BTS have been scrutinized in the above analysis. In order to overcome the initial difficulties that BTS faced, the band and Big Hit had to develop sophisticated strategies while actively utilizing internationalization and digitization. As they were not able to access the main Korean media outlets, BTS instead constructively utilized social media and internet platforms to diffuse relevant contents as a way to reach their fans. Accordingly, the wide range of fans has also created derivative contents which have been extensively shared among fandom and international audiences. Notably, in order to appeal to all level of fans who have different tastes of music, BTS has diversified their music style from hardcore hip-hop to others genres and their themes from (high) school life to other topics. Along with this, BTS and Big Hit often inject alluring elements such as well-known titles of films and songs or Western philosophy and literature. This strategy has made their fans feel familiar with BTS and their works.

In contrast with many other bands, BTS presents positive and healthy images through their frequent hard work while holding back any form of extravagance. Coupled with this aspect, BTS has sought to deliver encouraging messages that can be sympathized and shared by their fans through their songs and diverse activities. This makes their songs more attractive. Despite a number of restrictions, BTS and Big Hit have worked closely together to produce a large number of attractive songs and have tried to maintain consistency in terms of theme and storylines as well as the band's image. While these have been well maintained, BTS has also been able to diversify their music style and genre through active international collaboration with well-established artists. This has helped BTS to appeal to the fandoms of these artists as well which has significantly increased the international reputation of BTS. All of these strategic changes by BTS and Big Hit is summarized in Table 2.

Last but not least, it is important to highlight that BTS and Big Hit have sought to be more consumer-oriented in their approach. When they produce, distribute, and perform, the ultimate goal is to please their fandom. For instance, whenever there are meaningful achievements and recognitions, BTS has always tried to meet the demand and expectation of their fans and also expressed often how grateful they are for the love from their fans, specifically the ARMY. This is rather different from other successful artists who turn on very often to be more egocentric while wishing their fans to support and understand whatever these artists do. The best option to be successful in an industry is to match supply

and demand, for which the music business is no exception. More importantly, many artists should not forget the old saying that “pride is the father of the vanguard.”

Table 2. The strategic changes of BTS and Big Hit

Factor	Sub-Factors	Strategic Changes
Distributors	Hardware	Mass availability of BTS-produced contents (vlog videos and songs) online
	Software	Wide availability of derivative contents online
Producers	Basic	Diversified music styles (from hardcore hip-hop to other genres)
	Advanced	Appealing and familiar songs and titles
Consumers	Size	Positive and healthy image of the band
	Quality	Sympathizing and encouraging messages
Business context	Structure	Close and lean system for music producing
	Synergy	Active international collaboration

DISCUSSION

Korea is currently enjoying an unprecedented level of success in its (pop) culture. As this country has suffered a great deal of historical difficulty, a global recognition of this success may encourage the Korean government and its people to be prouder of it. In this regard, some may use it to stir up nationalism and cultural superiority or even to propagate their own political agenda. This tendency may be useful to publicize the government for the short term; however, it can lead to exclusivism from other countries, which may lead to an atmosphere against Korea and its (pop) culture. In fact, the counteraction such as the anti-Korean wave movement has already been witnessed in a few Asian countries. Some have even argued that Korean cultural products are only produced for a female fan base and/or that K-pop idols are mostly “manufactured” (Ainslie, Lipura, and Lim, 2017; Elfving-Hwang, 2018; Williamson, 2011). In this regard, four points need to be discussed.

First, if the Korean government wants to promote *Hallyu*, it should embrace a more recipient-friendly perspective. Instead of merely emphasizing the superiority and uniqueness of Korean culture, it would be better to highlight what kind of implications and messages *Hallyu* can deliver to other countries. In particular, the implications and messages should be addressed to those who have, in the words of BTS, “no more dream” to promote their cultural industries but are still willing to change this around by seeking to dream again. This

approach will draw in more attention from international scholars and practitioners as well as policy-makers from other countries.

Second, supporting fandom activities is useful for holding up their favorite bands. However, excessive exclusivism toward other bands while obsessively idolizing a favorite band should be considered as a form of “fake love,” and avoided at all costs. There exists cultural diversity, and people have also different tastes and opinions. One would reject or criticize certain bands or culture that others favor; yet one should not be discriminated or blamed excessively for this reason. It is noteworthy to mention that BTS haters attack the band online, not because of their music or style but mostly because of the raving fans who idolize the group while impolitely ignoring other performers.

Third, several media outlets and scholars have disparaged K-pop as they only understand it in narrow terms. One of the many criticisms in this respect is the fact that they consider K-pop bands as “manufactured” artists. In fact, Korean entertainment companies recruit aspirants with potential through auditions and provide them with a more systematic training program to develop further the potential for prospective stars. If both talented and manufactured artists have a similar outcome in any sense, who should be more appreciated? It should be noted that “manufactured” artists place great effort to achieve success. Should we ignore the “blood, sweat, and tears” put in by the manufactured artist? This point should be taken into account when considering K-pop.

Last, some argue that K-pop appeals to mostly a female audience and that it is only interested in money. This argument clearly demonstrates the deep entrenchment of discrimination and stereotyping toward K-pop and its music industry. For instance, why does the media make so little fuss about the fact that male audiences enjoy mixed martial arts, but creates such a stir over the fact that female audiences enjoy K-pop, with some even criticizing such behavior? One should not miss the fact that when the Beatles debuted, their core fans were young girls who were the first to appreciate the true value of the group while the media at the time were heavily critical. When it comes to the pursuit of money, it is often said that hunger makes art. However, this does not mean that art can be made only by hunger. Monetary reward is a good motivation from the perspective of the artist. Furthermore, from the perspective of an individual, an affluent lifestyle is better than a hard-pressed one. Instead of judging artists with one’s own biases, it would be better to let them “make it right.”

CONCLUSION

It has been almost two decades since K-pop first gained its global popularity and this trend has been amplified further and still continues. In this regard, it is necessary to analyze why K-pop has emerged in the global market. As BTS is currently at the center of the K-pop boom, it is meaningful to scrutinize the reasons behind their global popularity. In contrast to most existing studies that focus on fandom and its activities, this paper argues that the remarkable global popularity of BTS stands on the basis of the efforts of precedent K-pop artists.

On top of this, it has been the strategic efforts of BTS and Big Hit to overcome all the disadvantages they faced earlier in Korea, which broadly mirror what Moon (2016) explains the reasons for Korea's economic success. For this, sophisticated consumer-oriented strategies that utilize internationalization and digitization have been the key toward completing this task more efficiently as it provides multiple options for which BTS can make the best use of. This is different from many other artists who are tend to be more egocentric by rejecting internationalization and/or technological advancement and thus preferring to stick to their own philosophy. In this way, BTS and Big Hit have been able to find solutions to overcome most of the disadvantages that they had before, while at the same time enhance further their advantages and create new ones.

Through the Internet, the songs produced by BTS have been able to be diffused worldwide and the band has been able to produce more globally appealing works. Furthermore, these efforts have created a large number of international fans who enjoy the works of BTS. To achieve this, BTS and Big Hit had to closely integrate themselves with others regardless of their nationalities in order to generate a more synergetic network.

Regarding the global popularity of BTS, some in Korea argue that BTS should utilize more Korean content in order to promote their country and to demonstrate that they are a K-pop band. In this regard, one should consider the awarding of the *Hwagwan Order of Cultural Merit* to BTS at the 2018 Korean Popular Culture & Arts Awards (Herman, 2018).⁴ This was given because BTS released the song "Idol" that features traditional Korean musical elements. However, it should be noted that this song was inspired by the 1997

⁴This kind of attempt is not completely new; in fact, *Hayeoga* (1993) sung by Seo Taiji and Boys combined heavy meatal music with Korean traditional music beats and instruments.

Hollywood film *Fave/Off* directed by John Woo and also features elements of African beats, trap, and electronica alongside the Korean music.

“Dynamite” (2020) is the first song by BTS that features entirely English lyrics, yet so far, no one in Korea has criticized this aspect. Is this because they achieved great success? What would have happened, if this song did not do well? Would there be criticism of this song because it does not “promote” Korea and the Korean language?

Here, it is important to point out that BTS and K-pop achieved global success not because they are from Korea or feature Korean contents but because of their effective strategy. One should not forget that the reason for their global success is that their songs and performances are attractive to audiences around the world. In this regard, the policies related to Korean culture should be carefully considered. Some believe that simply promoting Korean culture overseas is more meaningful and in such a way people around the world would appreciate Korean culture (refer to Kim [2020a]). However, this view ignores how it works from the perspective of the recipient side. Primarily, there should be high interest, desire, and demand for Korean culture across the world as it is attractive.

As the concept of soft power has swept across the world, there has been increased interest in promoting culture. When it comes to culture, a large number of people believe that it is closely related to national identity and it should be protected and preserved. In this regard, the findings of Parc and Moon (2019) should not be missed. There is no cultural purity and culture is formed through a mixture of well-established and newly-establishing cultures which are termed as “accumulated” and “accumulable” cultures, respectively. When culture incorporates internationalization and technological advancement, it can be more competitive and thrive over time. Thus, culture is not inherited, but created.

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