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# **“I’m Taking Over You”: Marketing Tactics of the K-pop Industry Towards the West**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the strategies employed by the K-pop industry to effectively market itself to an American audience and subsequently gain widespread popularity in the Western music market. By investigating the intersections of transnationalism, parasocial interaction, and Orientalism, this study sheds light on the multifaceted factors contributing to the recent boom of K-pop in Western societies. Drawing on a comprehensive literature review and qualitative analysis, this research examines the transnational nature of K-pop, emphasizing how the genre transcends national borders through its music, visual branding, and fandom networks. It investigates how K-pop agencies actively engage in transnational practices, leveraging digital platforms, social media, and international collaborations to expand their reach and connect with Western audiences.

Furthermore, this study delves into the concept of parasocial interaction, exploring how K-pop cultivates a sense of intimacy and connection between artists and fans. It analyzes the meticulously crafted artist persona, the strategic use of social media platforms, and interactive fan events as key elements fostering parasocial relationships and generating dedicated fandoms. It will also discuss fandoms' ability to mobilize and promote artists, their passionate engagement in activities such as streaming and voting, and the presence of consumerism. This thesis explores how the K-pop industry actively fuels this fandom energy by providing interactive experiences, exclusive content, and a competitive environment. By addressing these topics, this thesis aims to provide valuable insights into the strategies employed by the K-pop industry to enter and flourish in the Western music market.

Keywords: K-pop, Korean Wave, Orientalism, parasocial interaction, transnationalism, fandom, consumerism.

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## Introduction

In 2022, American President Joe Biden invited Korean pop group BTS to the White House in order to discuss the rising numbers of anti-Asian racism and hate crimes in the country.<sup>1</sup> An interesting choice, considering it took place during Asian Heritage Month, where topics surrounding Asian-American heritage are celebrated and discussed. The members of BTS, however, are not Asian American. All seven are fully Korean, were born and grew up in South Korea, and never lived in a country that is not South Korea. The choice of President Biden to pick BTS as ambassadors to engage in a conversation with him on the subject is therefore remarkable, as BTS does not belong to the affected communities.

The obvious explanation would be, of course, the appeal of BTS' enormous star power in generating interest in the topic. Their millions of fans around the globe break streaming record after record and sell out stadiums in minutes. BTS have also demonstrated their capabilities in public diplomacy before when they appeared as diplomatic envoys to South Korea during a General Assembly of the United Nations in 2021.<sup>2</sup> No other clip on the UN's YouTube channel has more views than the one where BTS appeared, demonstrating the appeal Biden saw in choosing BTS as his guests. However, this was not the sole reason that they were invited. It was also a strategic move to strengthen the bonds between the two countries through celebrity diplomacy, which indicates the employment of well-known individuals in order to gather attention for political causes. That K-pop, short for Korean pop music, has garnered enough popularity and foothold in American markets that its artists are now being used by the highest-ranking political official in the United States as celebrity diplomacy is nothing sort of astonishing. Never before has the Western market seen such an influx in the popularity of non-Western music and its artists.

This popularity has its effects in other areas as well. Duolingo, the most popular mobile app for learning new languages, has recently published its 2022 language report which states that Korean remains on the rise among its user base. It was the most popular language to learn in four different countries that year, beating out English and Spanish, and the seventh most popular language on the app overall.<sup>3</sup> Duolingo credited their users' interest

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<sup>1</sup> "Joe Biden praat met K-popband BTS over anti-Aziatisch racisme," *NOS*, June 1, 2022, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2431049-joe-biden-praat-met-k-popband-bts-over-anti-aziatisch-racisme>.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Kwan, "Celebrity Diplomacy: What prompted Biden to invite the K-pop group BTS?" *Modern Diplomacy*, June 8, 2022. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/06/08/celebrity-diplomacy-what-prompted-biden-to-invite-the-k-pop-group-bts/>.

<sup>3</sup> Cindy Blanco, "2022 Duolingo Language Report," *Duolingo Blog*. December 6, 2022. <https://blog.duolingo.com/2022-duolingo-language-report/>.

in K-pop as one of the main motivators to learn the language via their service.<sup>4</sup> This interest is also reflected in the way global audiences are engaging with other Korean content. Streaming giant Netflix has been steadfastly investing in Korean content since 2016, but has rapidly increased the scale of their investments in the last four years, coinciding with the rise of K-pop. In 2021, the company announced its plan to invest over five hundred million dollars in Korean content, on top of the already invested seven hundred million since 2016.<sup>5</sup> Netflix made a deal with popular K-pop girl group BlackPink to publish several documentaries, and streaming competitor Disney+ did the same with BTS.

These are but a few examples to show how K-pop is booming. It is growing rapidly in popularity outside of its domestic borders and into an enthusiastic and profitable global market. So much so, that it is no longer a niche interest for online fan communities but mainstream enough to receive attention on the political level of the United States, one of the most powerful countries in the world. South Korea, a relatively small Asian country, has truly bombarded itself into the global pop culture market. This begs the question as to how South Korea and its K-pop industry have managed to achieve this when so many non-Western artists have tried their luck in the American music market before and been left disappointed. How have they managed to gain such a foothold?

By closely examining several aspects of K-pop's push toward the Western market in the last decade, this thesis will aim to answer the following question: *What strategies does K-pop successfully utilize to market itself to an American (and by extension, Western) audience, leading to the genre's recent boom in popularity?* In answering this question I will be guided by the following hypotheses:

- 1) K-pop's successful marketing strategies in the American market are primarily driven by its emphasis on visual aesthetics and its music that is exciting but familiar, which captivates and appeals to a wider audience.
- 2) K-pop's strategic use of social media platforms to foster an imagined personal bond between artists and fans plays a crucial role in its popularity boom by enabling direct interaction with fans and fostering a sense of community that attracts attention and curiosity from the Western audience.

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<sup>4</sup> Kayti Burt, "Meet the BTS Fans Learning Korean on Duolingo," *Duolingo Blog*, August 16, 2022. <https://blog.duolingo.com/bts-fans-learning-korean/>.

<sup>5</sup> Michelle Toh, "Netflix Plans Its Biggest-Ever Slate of Korean Content," *CNN*, January 17, 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/16/business/netflix-korean-content-expansion-2023-intl-hnk/index.html>.

- 3) K-pop's carefully curated and highly engaged fanbase, known as "fandom culture," plays a vital role in promoting and popularizing the genre through grassroots efforts and fan-driven initiatives creating a sense of inclusivity and participation that resonates with the Western audience.

I will be taking a qualitative approach while looking at three factors of K-pop that I argue are pivotal in its appeal to the Western market. I will be drawing from academic literature and recent news publications surrounding K-pop in formulating my analysis, as well as underscoring them with concrete, real-world examples of K-pop artists and fan behavior that epitomize my findings. I also will be limiting my research to the past decade. While K-pop has pushed for the Western market before, prior to 2013 they were largely unsuccessful in doing so. The period that K-pop truly began to experience a huge boom was the era of social media that arguably kicked off in 2013 and onwards when the smartphone became a common item to possess in the West. The K-pop industry and its popularity before the rise of social media are almost incomparable to what it is now, so therefore I will not be considering it in my research.

As a side note, the term American and Western market will be used interchangeably, as the American music market has long been considered the center of popular music, and success in the United States commonly helps facilitate success in other Western regions like Europe and Australia, while the opposite is not necessarily the case due to American hegemony on the cultural level. So while K-pop markets itself towards an American market specifically, they simultaneously reach other regions of the West while doing so. I use the term 'West' to refer to the people, countries, and markets of the following global regions: North America, Europe, and Australia.

In order to answer the overarching research question, this thesis will be structured as follows: First I will be giving a short yet comprehensive overview of the history of the K-pop genre, focussing on how it grew from a local initiative to a new global phenomenon. In this chapter, I will also introduce and define terms that are unique to the K-pop industry and its fanbase. The following section will provide a theoretical framework and a short literature review of previous research done in this field. The first chapter of my own analysis will examine the musical dimension of K-pop and how it balances itself between Western musical tradition and Eastern innovation. The second chapter will focus on the visual aesthetics of the artists as well as the content they produce that are characteristic of the genre. The third and final chapter will pay significant attention to fan and social media discourse surrounding

K-pop, as an actively fueled and encouraged fandom is one of the large driving factors behind K-pop's popularity and unique to the genre, at least to this scale.

## **Historical Overview of K-pop: Local Phenomenon to Global Influence**

This chapter provides a comprehensive yet brief examination of the history of K-pop music, tracing its evolution from a local phenomenon in 1990s South Korea to a contemporary global cultural force whose artists sell out venues all over the globe. Through an analysis of key milestones, influential artists, and industry developments, this chapter aims to shed some light on the factors that have contributed to the widespread popularity of K-pop music we are currently experiencing, emerging as a significant cultural export product of South Korea in recent years. This chapter explores the historical development of K-pop and its global influence, focusing on key periods and influential artists.

In 1994, the Korean government passed the Cultural Industries Promotion Act, a significant piece of legislation that aimed to promote and support the growth of cultural industries, including music, entertainment, film, broadcasting, and publishing. The Cultural Industries Promotion Act was designed to foster the development of Korean cultural industries by providing a legal framework and support systems. Its primary objectives were to enhance the competitiveness of Korean cultural products, stimulate economic growth, and promote cultural diversity. The act recognized the cultural industry as a strategic sector and sought to facilitate its expansion in order to strengthen South Korea's struggling economy at the time. The act not only promised a financial boost for the sector but also sought to facilitate training institutions to train young artists such as music schools and develop programs to showcase their newly cultivated talent. One of these programs was state-funded music broadcasts and talent shows that sought to provide a way for new artists to reach the public and increase their popularity.

Perhaps the most influential artist that appeared on such a state-sponsored music show in the early days of K-pop is Seo Taiji and Boys, a pioneering K-pop group that emerged as a crucial influence in the 1990s. Seo Taiji and Boys were a three-member group consisting of Seo Taiji, Yang Hyun-suk, and Lee Juno. They introduced a revolutionary musical style that defied conventional norms in South Korea at the time. Combining elements of hip-hop, rock, and R&B, they created a fusion of genres that challenged the prevailing musical landscape in South Korea, which was dominated by the Korean ballad, trot, and folk genres (Jung, 2016). Their experimental approach and incorporation of socially conscious lyrics set them apart from other contemporary acts. The hybrid music that mixed traditional Korean musical sentiment with new and trendy Western genres and styles resonated strongly with Korean youth, who were grappling with sociocultural changes and seeking an outlet for

self-expression. In addition to the appealing nature of their musical style, their songs addressed themes of alienation, societal issues, and the pursuit of personal identity. As a result, the group became a symbol of rebellion and empowerment for a generation finding its own identity in a period of change and high expectations from their elders.

The groundbreaking achievements of the group laid the foundation for the subsequent growth and development of K-pop as we know it today. Their experimentation with musical genres, incorporation of choreographed performances, and focus on visual aesthetics set a precedent for future K-pop acts. Subsequently, the influence of Seo Taji and Boys' eclectic musical style and performances can be seen in the work of many contemporary K-pop artists. Perhaps one of the more obvious examples is the prevalence of rap in K-pop music, which Seo Taji and Boys introduced with their debut song "Nan Arayo" in 1992. Unlike Western music groups in the pop genre, almost every K-pop group has one or multiple dedicated rappers, even groups whose music cannot be categorized as hip-hop at all. But their influence on the K-pop scene does not stop with musical style. One of the group members, Yang Hyun-suk, went on to found YG Entertainment, one of the most famous and influential Korean entertainment companies. YG is home to several of the most successful and influential K-pop acts of the last two decades such as 2NE1, BigBang, and Blackpink.

In the wake of Seo Taji and Boys, many other music groups emerged in the Korean music scene at the end of the 1990s and early 2000s. Some of the most popular acts were H.O.T., Sechs Kies, and Shinhwa. These groups continued with the groundwork laid by Seo Taji and refined it. In this period artists and their management started to focus more and more on synchronized dances, catchy tunes, and visually appealing performances. Entertainment companies started to pop up to scout and sign 'diamonds in the rough' in order to train them to become fully-fledged idols, following the focus of the Korean government in the Cultural Industries Promotion Act on training new artists. The term 'idol' started gaining traction during this period, to refer to artists who went through this newly developed training system, had a clean moral public image, and worked under the K-pop formula; the aforementioned eclectic musical style, synchronized dance performances, and accompanied by a visually appealing appearance. This was the period where the K-pop formula and system as it still exists today was developed and manifested.

It was also when K-pop slowly started to expand outside its domestic market. Now legendary K-pop artist BoA had her debut in the Korean music scene in 2000 and managed to secure a number-one spot on the Japanese music charts with her first fully Japanese album in 2002 and selling over a million copies, a feat previously unimaginable by a Korean artist. It

was the breakthrough success the industry needed to truly grasp the international appeal of this new genre of music that they had developed in the past decade.

In the wake of BoA's unprecedented success in Japan, intentional catering toward international markets started being noticeable in the industry. During the mid-2000s, K-pop groups that debuted often had non-Korean members in their midst. Often Japanese but sometimes also Chinese or Thai, these idols were intentionally scouted for their inherent appeal towards the country they hail from. Similarly, auditions were also held in foreign countries with a large group of ethnic Koreans, like the United States, to scout potential idols among Korean populations elsewhere in the world. Entertainment companies hoped that these idols would facilitate a valuable opening in the market for them to break through in their perspective countries of origin, be it due to their ethnicity and ties to the culture or their mastery of the native language which made fan interaction and international promotion easier.

This effect was further strengthened by the emergence of digital media platforms, particularly YouTube, that played a significant role in the continued global expansion of K-pop. Fans worldwide could now easily access and share K-pop music videos and other forms of content and K-pop fans could find other like-minded people online, contributing to its viral spread. It was no longer necessary for fans to travel to South Korea to interact with their favorite idols and see their performances, the internet could facilitate that international fan interaction.

An example of what online virality can do for a K-pop artist was SM Entertainment's new girl group at the time: Girls' Generation. They debuted in 2007 and had already garnered quite a bit of popularity before it exploded to enormous proportions in 2009 with their hit single "Gee". In 2008, YouTube had already proven itself to be a key player in perpetuating the spread of the K-pop genre around the globe by enabling hits from SHINee, BigBang, and Wonder Girls to garner widespread attention in both Asia and beyond with their music videos.<sup>6</sup> Released in January of 2009, "Gee" became an almost overnight success. It held the top spot in the Korean music charts for a record number of weeks, only beaten by Psy's "Gangnam Style" years later. The choreography and the fashion of the music went viral, and fans could be seen everywhere sporting the colorful skinny jeans the girls were wearing in the music video and copying the signature 'crab dance' choreography.<sup>7</sup> It truly was a trendsetting

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<sup>6</sup> Tamar Herman, "The Legacy of Girls' Generation's 'Gee,' 10 Years Later," *Billboard*, May 1, 2019. <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/girls-generation-gee-10th-anniversary-legacy-8492312/>

<sup>7</sup> Herman, "Legacy of Girls' Generation."

song that kicked off an enormously successful career for the group, accumulating in multiple number-one hits, awards, accolades, and of course millions of fans. Girls' Generation became so popular and influential in the K-pop scene that they received the honorific nickname "The Nation's Girl Group" in Korea.

In the following years, many artists followed Girls' Generation's success and acquired their own viral hits. Among the most successful of these artists, a trend became apparent. Most of these artists hailed from one of the following three entertainment companies: SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, or JYP Entertainment. These 'Big 3' as they became known, were almost synonymous with success. These agencies provided comprehensive artist development programs, often spanning multiple years, contributing to the professionalization of the industry. Debuting under one of these companies meant almost instant success for new K-pop idols, as they could use the reputation and fame garnered by their fellow idols as a boost for their own career. Fans who loved a certain artist under a company were very likely to check out and support their favorite group's 'brothers and sisters', a familial term used among fans to indicate artists under the same company. For the Big 3, this became a self-sustaining system; fans supported artists debuting under these companies because they were the Big 3 and these companies remained relevant, profitable, and a pioneer in the field because they had a loyal company fanbase that gave them support and, of course, money.

This Big 3 dominance over the K-pop world during the 2000s and early 2010s made the unprecedented success of BTS even more remarkable. BTS, a seven-member boy group, debuted in 2013 under Big Hit Entertainment, a completely unknown and irrelevant entertainment company at the time. Their success can be attributed to a combination of factors. Firstly, BTS has a unique musical style that blends various genres, including hip-hop, pop, and R&B, appealing to a diverse audience. Their lyrics often touch upon social issues, mental health, and youth empowerment, resonating with fans on a deeper level. Additionally, BTS has utilized social media platforms, particularly Twitter and YouTube, to engage directly with their fans, known as the ARMY. Their active presence on these platforms, along with their engaging content, including behind-the-scenes videos, vlogs, and performances, has enabled them to foster a strong and loyal fan base.

This dedicated fan base has propelled them to international stardom over the years, breaking numerous records and topping global music charts, including the Billboard Hot 100. On this famous American music chart, they are in the top three for the most number-one hits for a music group. With six number-one hits under their belt, they are in the company of The Beatles and The Supremes, the only other music groups who have achieved this feat in

American history.<sup>8</sup> They also managed to accumulate five Grammy nominations over the past four years, an unprecedented feat by any Korean artist.

The breakthrough of BTS in the international market has opened the floodgates for other K-pop acts to find success in the United States, the world's largest pop market. Girl group Blackpink has recently headlined Coachella, arguably the most famous music festival in the world at the moment. They were the first Korean artist to ever do so. There is also an increase in international promotions, with multiple K-pop groups making an appearance on well-known American talk shows like "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," "Good Morning America," and "The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon". K-pop music videos continue to break records on YouTube for the most views, album sales continue to rise with each comeback the artists make, and the online fan community appears to be ever-growing.

It cannot be denied that K-pop truly has developed into a global phenomenon over the past decades. Where it started as a local initiative to stimulate South Korea's economic and cultural development, it has now grown into a Korean Wave that is flooding the Western music market with a force the likes of which has never been experienced before. While many idols and their agencies have worked towards this success, there were a few key artists that truly opened the floodgates for the next step in K-pop's trajectory toward global stardom and pushed the genre a level further than it had operated on before.

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<sup>8</sup> Hugh McIntyre, "BTS And Jimin Match The Beatles And The Supremes On The Billboard Charts," *Forbes*, April 7, 2023.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/hughmcintyre/2023/04/07/bts-and-jimin-match-the-beatles-and-the-supremes-on-the-billboard-charts/?sh=5e333c902dc7>.

## Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The global popularity and cultural influence of K-pop have sparked academic interest and scholarly inquiries into its multifaceted nature. To comprehensively understand and analyze the complexities of K-pop's marketing strategies, it is crucial to establish a framework that provides a lens through which we can interpret its cultural, social, and economic dimensions. This chapter presents the conceptual framework that will guide the investigation of K-pop in this thesis. In order to interpret the existing literature surrounding this topic and other findings based on industry reports, interviews, and published new articles, this thesis will draw largely on the concepts of transnationalism, Orientalism, and parasocial interaction.

In order to make sense of both these academic concepts and the surge of popularity the genre is experiencing, it is important to acknowledge the work done by scholars who have written about the driving factors behind the Korean Wave and its impact. The term 'Korean Wave' refers to the dramatic rise of South Korean popular culture since the 1990s. An important work is the book *The Korean Wave: Korean Popular Culture in Global Context*, published in 2014. The book contains a collection of essays and research by several experts in the field of Korean popular culture and its transnational exchange that address the Korean Wave in three steps: production, glocalization, and consumption. As this book was published in 2014 at the advent of the social media and smartphone era, many examples have become slightly outdated as new artists currently have climbed in popularity and K-pop as a whole has exploded in popularity since then. However, it still provides many valuable analyses on the topic, especially in regard to the genre's history.

*The Korean Wave* looked at K-pop through a transnational lens and saw the genre as an accumulation of the influence and ideas of various regions of the world and their musical and cultural traditions. Transnationalism refers to the process of individuals, groups, and institutions operating across national boundaries and engaging in activities that transcend or go beyond the confines of a single nation-state. It is a concept that recognizes the increasing interconnectedness and interdependence between people and societies on a global scale. Kyong Yoon marked the global emergence and popularity of K-pop as a challenge to the Western-centric framework of cultural globalization in his chapter on the transnational nature of K-pop in the *Routledge Handbook of Asian Transnationalism*.<sup>9</sup> Yoon also marked that

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<sup>9</sup> Kyong Yoon, "K-POP TRANS/NATIONALISM," in *Routledge Handbook of Asian Transnationalism*, (Routledge, 2022): 400. doi: 10.4324/9781003152149-36

racial frameworks, such as Orientalism, have functioned as the major barrier for K-pop to overcome in order to achieve success in the Western market.<sup>10</sup>

Due to the fact that K-pop hails from South Korea and is performed by Asian (appearing) idols while a large part of the fandom does not herald from Asia, it therefore is also vital to acknowledge the role that Orientalism plays in the wave of popularity it is currently experiencing. It is a concept coined by the literary scholar Edward Said in his influential book *Orientalism* published in 1978. It refers to a way of thinking, representing, and studying the Orient (primarily the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia) that is rooted in Western colonialism, imperialism, and hegemony. Orientalism is a form of cultural and intellectual domination that shapes Western understanding and representations of the East. In the colonial mindset, the East is mysterious and sensational yet inferior. Physical and cultural traits that are deemed as oriental are seen as exotic and become sexualized and fetishized.

Since 1978, East Asia has undergone quite a metamorphosis. In the past fifty years, the economies of East Asian countries like China, Japan, and South Korea have grown exponentially. From war-torn and economically destitute nations, all three of these countries are now placed in the top ten of the largest economies in the world.<sup>11</sup> So what happens to the concept of Orientalism when these Asian countries are no longer inferior to the West and when it becomes clear that the East is just as advanced? Like many stereotypes advantageous to those in power, in this case, the West, it does not die. Instead, it morphs into something else that fits the current situation.

Techno-Orientalism was introduced by David Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta Niu in their 2015 book *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*. This specific type of Orientalism is a way of imagining the future as Asian, wherein Asians themselves are often figured as robots.<sup>12</sup> It characterizes Asian technological advancements and their societies as science-fiction, dystopian, and futuristic. Whereas Said framed the Eastern Other as peripheral, fundamentally backward, and uncivilized, techno-Orientalism presents the Asian as “threateningly futuristic and advanced”.<sup>13</sup> In this case, the Other is a robot, or robotic in nature, and is figured as distant, unrelatable, and inscrutable. This type of Orientalism is prevalent in the Western discourse surrounding

<sup>10</sup> Yoon, “TRANS/NATIONALISM,” 402.

<sup>11</sup> “Largest Economies in the World,” Wisevoter, accessed June 27, 2023, <https://wisevoter.com/country-rankings/largest-economies-in-the-world/>.

<sup>12</sup> David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, eds. *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*. (Rutgers University Press, 2015), 18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1647cqh>.

<sup>13</sup> Jane Hu, “Where the Future Is Asian, and the Asians Are Robots,” *The New Yorker*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/where-the-future-is-asian-and-the-asians-are-robots>.

K-pop, as will be demonstrated in the following chapter, due to it often being perceived as an unoriginal imitation.

How K-pop is related to Orientalism has been researched by several scholars. Wonjung Min analyzed the dual Orientalism of the Chilean fans of K-pop, where she contrasted the views of K-pop fans regarding their idols with the opinions they held on the Asian population in Chile. Min attributed the widely different attitudes to the prevailing worldview installed by Eurocentric colonialism co-existing with the rapidly growing influence of neoliberalism in Chile.<sup>14</sup> Aya Goto-Hirsig wrote on the way South Korea deliberately plays into Orientalist stereotypes in order for their artists to break into the American market, stating the following reason for doing so:

“This is largely due to the unequal power relationship that continues between Korea and America which is manifested in American pop cultures’ continued global hegemony, allowing Americans to largely be uncontested in their Orientalist world view, and for K-Pop to be forced to mold to Orientalist biases to succeed.”<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, Orientalism is an important factor to consider in the analysis done in this thesis on the impact of K-pop’s idol culture on its producers and its consumers. Taking into consideration the deliberate marketing and manufacturing of a Western appealing image appears to be vital in analyzing how both consumers buy into the stereotypes and how producers purposefully perpetuate them.

The connection between K-pop and techno-Orientalism has also been made before. In an article by Zhaoqi Wang, associated with the University of Birmingham, characteristics of the Korean idol-making industry are evaluated as a production process. Wang focused her research on the training and creation of idols. She concluded:

“It produces standardized dancers and singers in the entertainment business as products, which possess the features of culture industry theory including art production has been factorized, crafted or produced, artworks are characterized by pseudo-individualism, artworks exploit consumers by providing cultural pleasure,

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<sup>14</sup> Wonjung Min, “Mis Chinos, Tus Chinos: The Orientalism of Chilean K-pop fans,” *International Communication Gazette* 83, no. 8 (December 2021): 804. doi: 10.1177/1748048520928254.

<sup>15</sup> Aya Goto-Hirsig, “K-Pop; Defying or Perpetuating Orientalist Stereotypes?” *Outstanding Student Work in Asian Studies* 5 (2018), 9.  
<https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=asianstudiesstudents>

capitalist ideology invariably manipulates the population.”<sup>16</sup>

Wang saw the way idols were made in the K-pop industry as product development, due to the systematic training of artists which results in everything coming out relatively similar that lacks true individualism. The idol, in this analysis, is robotic in nature due to its pseudo-individualism and factorized characteristics.

Others were more critical. Jiahui Gu, associated with Duke University, also made the connection between K-pop and a manufactured image. Gu acknowledged that the way K-pop constantly produces similar yet innovative products that satisfy consumers’ desires by reproducing them through a similar artist training system.<sup>17</sup> Yet she also noted that there are a lot of recent developments in the K-pop sphere that the argument does not account for, especially with regard to the production-consumption model.<sup>18</sup> While many so-called ‘products’ come from big entertainment agencies that have dominated the industry for decades, due to the emergence of social media the industry no longer solely dictates what products will become popular with consumers.<sup>19</sup> Fandoms have become paramount in its success.

Gu also notes the importance of fandom in this aspect. Due to fans actively engaging in fan activities on social media and with content posted by their favorite idols and other members of the fandom, they hold a lot of power in the generation of popularity for an artist. The following quotation holds K-pop group BTS as an example of a group where social media engagement was critical in their breakthrough, due to their heralding from a very small agency without much, if any, cultural capital in the K-pop industry:

“It [succes] results from the widely use of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, where the interaction between producers and consumers is highlighted and fans’ participation in dissemination is essential in the making of BTS’ success and popularity.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Zhaoqi Wang, “Research on Korean Idol-Making Industry Based on Culture Industry Theory,” in *Proceedings of the 2022 6th International Seminar on Education, Management and Social Sciences* (Atlantis Press, 2022), 3371.

<sup>17</sup> Jiahui Gu, “From Co-Production to Broken Relationship: Agencies, Idols, and Fans in the Making of K-pop”, (MA thesis, Duke University, 2020), 14.

<sup>18</sup> Gu, “Co-Production to Broken Relationship,” 14.

<sup>19</sup> Gu, “Co-Production to Broken Relationship,” 14.

<sup>20</sup> Gu, “Co-Production to Broken Relationship,” 14.

Gu also marks the efforts of fans as an essential requirement for popularity in the K-pop scene in recent years.

Others have also underscored this importance, as there have been many recent publications that research the unique relationships between idols and their fans, and the consequences that flow from it. Brittany Tinaliga's 2018 study looked into the competitive performativity of K-pop fandoms, where she discussed the distinctive levels in which someone's K-pop fan identity can become entrenched with their personal identity, leading to toxic fandom conduct.<sup>21</sup> This type of identity formation was further examined in 2020 by Jenol and Pazil, who paid attention to the way K-pop can provide a form of escapism for fans, leading to idolization.<sup>22</sup>

It is therefore clear that it is incredibly important to pay some attention to the way K-pop fandoms are constructed, as K-pop fandoms play a critical role in the transnational popularity of the genre. Scholars have explored the formation and dynamics of K-pop fandoms, emphasizing their transnational nature and the active participation of fans in online communities, fan events, and transnational fan practices such as streaming, voting, and fan-driven promotional campaigns. An essential concept to understand for this is parasocial interaction. This is a psychological concept that describes the one-sided, asymmetric relationships that individuals form with media figures, such as celebrities, fictional characters, or in the context of K-Pop, idols. It was first introduced by Horton and Wohl in 1956 to explain the phenomenon of individuals developing feelings of connection and familiarity with media personalities despite the absence of any real-life interaction or personal relationship. It suggests that through regular exposure to media content, viewers develop a sense of intimacy, attachment, and emotional connection with media figures.<sup>23</sup> This connection is often based on the perception of shared experiences, interests, or personal characteristics portrayed by the media figure.<sup>24</sup> Fans may come to feel as though they "know" the media figure on a personal level, despite the relationship being entirely one-sided.

Parasocial Interaction Theory explains that individuals engage in these relationships as a way to fulfill psychological and social needs. Fans may seek companionship, social belonging, and emotional support from the perceived relationship with the media figure. This

<sup>21</sup> Brittany Tinaliga, "'At War for OPPA and Identity': Competitive Performativity among Korean-Pop Fandoms," MA thesis, University of San Francisco, 2018: 32.

<sup>22</sup> Ayuni M. Jenol and Hafeeza A. Pazil. "Escapism and motivation: Understanding K-pop fans well-being and identity." *Malaysian Journal of Society and Space* 16, no. 4, (November 2020): 345. doi: 10.17576/geo-2020-1604-25.

<sup>23</sup> Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl. "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction." *Psychiatry* 19, no. 1 (1956): 219. doi: 10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049.

<sup>24</sup> Horton and Wohl, "Para-Social Interaction," 222.

can be particularly relevant in the context of K-Pop idol culture, where fans invest significant time and emotional energy into following the activities, achievements, and personal lives of their favorite idols.

Factors that contribute to the formation of parasocial relationships include the frequency and duration of exposure to media content featuring the idol, the perceived authenticity of the media figure's persona, and the level of identification and emotional investment by the fan. Social media platforms and fan interactions further facilitate parasocial relationships by providing fans with opportunities to engage with idols indirectly through comments, likes, and interactions with other fans.

It is important to note that parasocial relationships are inherently one-sided and lack genuine reciprocity. While fans may develop strong emotional connections with idols, the idols themselves are typically unaware of individual fans and the depth of their feelings. Nevertheless, these parasocial relationships can have significant impacts on fans' emotional well-being, self-esteem, and sense of belonging within fandom communities. Parasocial Interaction Theory helps understand the psychological processes underlying fans' attachment and emotional investment in idols. It provides a framework for analyzing the consequences of these relationships and their influence on fans' behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions within the context of K-Pop idol culture.

The three concepts introduced in this chapter will be utilized for the conclusions drawn in the following chapters on K-pop's marketing with regard to music, visual branding, and fan interaction. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations and gaps in the existing literature. Further research is needed to explore the nuanced experiences and perspectives of K-pop idols, fans, and consumers within a broader context. Due to K-pop being such a recent trend, there is not yet a large base of peer-reviewed literature on the long-standing effect K-pop has on its fans. If specifically related to K-pop, many of the academic works that could be found online are produced by students. Another limitation is that many articles focus on one specific factor of the K-pop industry in their research, while K-pop as a whole is hard to define by just one characteristic. While the idols and their music might look and sound similar, there are so many people who work behind the scenes to work at the experience the genre sells to fans. This research project aims to tie multiple factors together. This will sometimes make it challenging to draw clear conclusions to certain questions, but through existing on the intersection of transnationalism, parasocial interaction, and orientalism, this thesis will aim to utilize these concepts to analyze recent developments. By further developing the ideas coined by scholars and theorists in this chapter, I will look at

the marketing strategies of the K-pop industry from different angles and why it has been working so well in recent years.

## Chapter 1: Music that is New but Familiar

According to Guinness World Records, BTS is officially the most streamed group in the history of Spotify, a popular music streaming platform.<sup>25</sup> As of March 3, 2023, their music has amassed nearly 32 billion streams on the platform, which is nearly double the 16.3 billion streams as of April 2021 that made them set the record two years prior.<sup>26</sup> They are also the most followed group on the platform in Spotify history and the ninth most streamed act on the platform overall, placing themselves in the top ten among pop giants like Taylor Swift, Ed Sheeran, The Weeknd, and Ariana Grande.<sup>27</sup> How has a K-pop group like BTS managed to achieve such numbers? The K-pop industry uses several tactics on the musical level to increase its marketability to Western audiences. This chapter discusses these tactics in three levels: 1) musical styles and trends; 2) English as a connector; 3) collaborative efforts.

K-pop music blends elements of the East and the West to create something new. It is carefully crafted to present a thrilling experience for Western audiences, but not too foreign to be alarming. It has to remain marketable to Western fans. So while the lyrics are sung in Korean, the music includes or emulates popular beats and styles from Western pop music. It lets itself be influenced by many Western music genres in its production, like hip-hop, pop, and R&B. It also moves along with global trends. When the Western pop market experienced an electronic dance music (EDM) trend in the early 2010s with artists like Avicii and Major Lazer scoring hit after hit with their collaborations with pop singers, the K-pop scene also saw a rise in releases with an EDM influence. Girl groups T-ARA and f(x) were known for their EDM sound in the early to mid-2010s, with songs like “Sugar Free ” and “Electric Shock” climbing to the top of the K-pop charts. Currently, Western pop music is seeing a major popularity surge of interpolated beats and melodies with hits like “I’m Good (Blue)” by David Guetta and Bebe Rexha that sample “Blue” from Eiffel 65. We see this trend being mirrored in K-pop. In 2022, for example, IVE released “After Like”, a song that samples the melody from Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive” and BlackPink released “Shutdown” which samples Niccolò Paganini’s “La Campanella”. K-pop thus flows with Western pop trends to

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<sup>25</sup> Dominic Punt, “K-pop legends BTS reach 31 billion streams on Spotify to smash own record,” *Guinness World Records*, March 10, 2023.

<https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2023/3/k-pop-legends-bts-reach-31-billion-streams-on-spotify-to-smash-own-record-740780#:~:text=BTS's%20most%20streamed%20song%20on,Dragons%2C%20Maroon%205%20and%20Queen.>

<sup>26</sup> Punt, “K-pop legends BTS.”

<sup>27</sup> “Most streamed male group on Spotify,” *Guinness World Records*, accessed on June 21, 2023. <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/643081-most-streamed-act-on-spotify-group>.

play into audience preferences and familiarity while also using the K-pop flair to provide it with something new.

Another interesting trend is that the use of English in K-pop songs has increased as its international popularity has grown. Now that the largest market is no longer the domestic, but rather the international, K-pop songwriters seek to incorporate lyrics that fans can memorize and sing along to. The English lyrics are often tied to the hook of the song, which is the part that is repeated the most so that international audiences can get swept up in the catchy tune and sing along every time the hook returns. It thus allows for easy engagement with K-pop for those who do not speak or understand Korean.

There are also songs that have both an original version that mostly consists of Korean with bits of English sprinkled throughout and a version that is completely English. K-pop group NCT released their 2018 song “Regular” in both an original version and an English version, and they are marked on Spotify as such. Got7 took it a step further, releasing “Lullaby” in four different languages in 2018: Korean, English, Chinese, and Spanish. Going even further than that, an increasing number of K-pop artists are now releasing songs that are completely in English. Examples are the 2020 “Dynamite” and 2021 “Butter” by BTS, which do not contain a single Korean word. Both of these songs became huge hits in the international market, spurring the current trend among K-pop artists to start releasing more completely English songs in order to replicate the success BTS had with their singles. Girl group Twice, who prior to the BTS releases always used to be more focused on the domestic market, has now been releasing an accompanying original English track in addition to a mostly Korean song every time they release new music for the past two years. While they promote the Korean song in the domestic market, every time they go on TV shows in the United States they pick one of their English songs to perform.

Yet it is important to note that these English songs are still K-pop songs in nature. They are still marked with an eclectic, funky musical style, stylized outfits, and elaborate music videos with synchronized choreographies like any other K-pop song. This is, in part, due to the prevailing Orientalist assumption that there is a clear divide between the East and the West. If it is too foreign, it will not find mainstream popularity, but if it is too familiar it will be regarded as “inauthentic and a mere inferior imitation of Western music.”<sup>28</sup> K-pop artists therefore have to constantly balance between the two and make sure they do not swing too much to either side.

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<sup>28</sup> Goto-Hirsig, “Defying or Perpetuating,” 5.

If they do happen to end up on the more “Western” side of the spectrum, they risk getting critiqued with the terms like imitative, inauthentic, or clones of American pop.<sup>29</sup> These terms all have negative connotations, implying that K-pop is not worthy to borrow from and be influenced by those genres.<sup>30</sup> Again, this corroborates the Orientalist viewpoint that Western cultural capital belongs solely to the West and that all other products influenced by it are cheap imitations. It is also important to note what is being implied by the word ‘inauthentic’ in this case. It implies that K-pop is not something that is in line with a Korean artist’s traditional culture and therefore should strive to be more ‘authentic’ instead. Additionally, other Western artists are not held up to the same standards and are allowed or even encouraged to break free from their country’s musical tradition or other defining traits without being labeled as inauthentic.<sup>31</sup> This underscores the basis of Orientalist views that clouds the judgment Western critics often have when looking at K-pop. Instead of looking at K-pop as an adaptation of various musical traditions and styles to create something new in the age of an increasingly globalized world, its ties to Western musical tradition are framed as a shortcoming.

This would, however, be an unfair and incomplete way of looking at K-pop music. Seeing K-pop purely as a consequence of Americanization does not account for South Korea’s own agency and initiatives that have brought about the creation of the genre, as demonstrated in the historical overview. Seeing it as an Asian imitation of Western pop would be equivalent to indulging in colonial discourse, which sees the West as the colonizer and South Korea simply as the colonized.<sup>32</sup> Regarding it as an imitation also implies that the Western original would always be better or more popular and that K-pop music would always exist in its shadow.

However, with its recent popularity, it becomes apparent that that is not the case. Instead of following a trend, K-pop itself has become the trend, hereby shifting its position on the global music market from trend follower to trendsetter.<sup>33</sup> Brittany Press, a publicist for Helix Publicity, which aims to promote K-pop artists in Western markets remarks in an interview with the Korea Times that K-pop has gotten a lot more media attention in the last years but also remarks how this has been very different in the past:

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<sup>29</sup> Goto-Hirsig, “Defying or Perpetuating,” 5.

<sup>30</sup> Goto-Hirsig, “Defying or Perpetuating,” 5.

<sup>31</sup> Goto-Hirsig, “Defying or Perpetuating,” 6.

<sup>32</sup> Tinnaphop Sinsomboonthong, “Cultural hybridity of K-pop music: From the west to South Korea, from South Korea to the globe,” *Journal of Language and Culture* 39, no. 2 (2020): 79.

<sup>33</sup> Sinsomboonthong, “Cultural hybridity,” 80.

"In the past, when Korean singers came to the U.S., this was hardly covered in the media, with only their fans knowing about the news. Even when they made it into radio or TV shows, this had such a little impact that most people do not realize or remember."<sup>34</sup>

The media landscape that surrounds K-pop in the West is very different compared to a decade ago. Rather than sporadic and inconsequential media coverage, the discourse surrounding K-pop has grown to be more serious and widespread with mainstream acknowledgement that shows an understanding of at least some groups in specific and of the industry as a whole.<sup>35</sup>

This newfound position as a trendsetter is also made clear by the interest the American music industry is now showing in K-pop. Attempts to bridge the gap between the Eastern and Western music markets are not always unidirectional anymore with the K-pop industry doing its best to break into the American market. Currently, we see the opposite happening as well. The American music market itself is now being influenced by K-pop, which shows itself in the many collaborations that are being released with Western artists. BlackPink appeared on Lady Gaga's 2020 album "Chromatica" with a collaborative track called "Sour Candy." Red Velvet's Wendy collaborated with John Legend on the English R&B ballad "Written in the Stars." BTS collaborated with many famous Western artists like Coldplay, Nicki Minaj, Halsey, and Megan Thee Stallion. For their collaboration with Coldplay they were even nominated for a Grammy in the category Best Pop Duo/Group Performance but ultimately did not win the award.

The global appeal of K-pop seems to have caught the attention of American artists and industry professionals, who see the potential for cross-cultural collaborations to tap into the vast and dedicated K-pop fan base and the enormous Asian market. K-pop artists, in turn, can use the collaborations to reach a Western fanbase that might not have been attracted to K-pop otherwise. Teaming up with well-known Western celebrities also allows for more media coverage on its own artists, by generating buzz and excitement for the upcoming release. That many world-class Western artists are now eager to work with K-pop acts, shows that K-pop music is also willing to cooperate and coexist with Western pop instead of trying to overtake it or exist separately from each other. It is not rising up to challenge American pop's superiority in a confrontational manner but is instead making a name for itself through

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<sup>34</sup> Dong Sun-hwa, "Many people in US music industry want K-pop to go away," *The Korea Times*, April 4, 2022. [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2023/07/398\\_323314.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2023/07/398_323314.html).

<sup>35</sup> Jenna Gibson, "How K-pop Broke the West: An Analysis of Western Media Coverage from 2009 to 2019," *International Journal of Korean Studies* 12, no. 2 (2018): 29.

its unique musical and performance style that has enabled them to become a trend in the Western music market today.<sup>36</sup>

There are many clever ways the K-pop industry has developed and positioned its music in order to resonate with a Western audience. Instead of aiming to imitate Western pop, the use of English and the increase of completely English songs appears to be more of a clever marketing tactic than an attempt to replicate. All the elements that are so typical of the K-pop genre are still there, even in the English releases. So in order to bridge the gap between Korean artists and their non-Korean fans, language seems to be the preferred common ground to go for while holding on to all the other aspects that characterize the genre like choreography and styling. K-pop also shows its willingness to reach a broader audience through collaboration efforts with Western artists. By teaming up, artists can leverage each other's fan bases, generating buzz and excitement around the joint project. This cross-promotion helps both parties reach new audiences and potentially boost their popularity and commercial success through stimulating media coverage. The way K-pop opens up its music to invite Western collaborations and is willing to meet its intended audience halfway by removing a potential language barrier is in line with the continued globalization of the music industry, a natural progression that K-pop is embracing wholeheartedly.

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<sup>36</sup> Sinsomboonthong, "Cultural hybridity," 80.

## Chapter 2: The Power of Visual Branding

“By the way, your English is phenomenal,” said KTLA 5 Morning News host Sam Rubin to NCT’s Johnny when the K-pop group appeared in the American television show back in 2019. As a reaction to the somewhat patronizing tone of Rubin, Johnny could be seen whispering “well... yeah I’m from Chicago,” when Rubin collected the microphone from him. John Suh, who carries the stage name Johnny, is a Korean-American who was born and grew up in the city of Chicago, so he speaks “phenomenal” English due to it being his native language. Rubin, and other American show hosts and celebrities who have made similar remarks about other K-pop stars before, did not know or consider this.

It speaks to the power of the K-pop brand that it is immediately associated with Korean in the eyes of many who are unfamiliar with the specific details of K-pop and its groups. The status as a K-pop idol becomes the sole determinant of identity, loyalty, and heritage. Contrary to the assumption of many American interviewers, K-pop is actually very diverse and the fact that it is a genre that originated in Korea cannot be used as the identity marker for its artists. So why does it keep happening? This chapter takes a look at the visual aesthetics of K-pop idols and the K-pop brand through the lens of transnationalism in order to explain how K-pop has been influenced by Western standards of beauty and how it is now being used to its advantage, as well as looking at the visual brand of K-pop as a whole and the reasons behind its marked ‘Korean-ness’.

That appearance matters in K-pop is no secret. It is a musical genre that revolves heavily around its visual aesthetics; from flashy music videos to fashion-forward outfits. The idols themselves are not exempted from this emphasis on visuals as they are the centerpiece of the aesthetically appealing package that is K-pop. The importance that appearance is granted is in line with the beauty culture of South Korea as a whole, as it is one of the plastic surgery capitals of the world. Around one out of five women in South Korea have undergone at least one cosmetic procedure in their life, compared to one out of twenty in the United States.<sup>37</sup>

One of the most popular cosmetic surgeries in South Korea is called blepharoplasty, also known as double eyelid surgery. The procedure aims to reconstruct the mono eyelid to a double eyelid, wherein the eyes have arc-shaped creases between the eyelashes and eyebrows. Mono eyelids do not have that crease above the eyes and are a common trait in

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<sup>37</sup> Claire Lee, “Uncovering history of double eyelid surgery,” *The Korea Herald*, September 11, 2015. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150911000982>.

people of East Asian descent. Double eyelids are a typical facial feature in White people, whereas only around fifty percent of Koreans naturally have double eyelids.<sup>38</sup>

The surgery was originated and popularized by Dr. Ralph Millard, a White American man who served as the chief plastic surgeon for the US Marine Corps during the Korean War, where he was stationed to treat accident and burn victims of the war. During his years of service, he also started frequently operating on Korean brides of American military personnel, who were planning to join their partners and build a life together in the United States. In his essay “The Oriental Eyelid and its Surgical Revision” published in 1964, Millard explains his newly developed procedure and its benefits for patients. He also states a noteworthy opinion on the impression of mono eyelids: “The absence of the palpebral fold produces a passive expression which seems to epitomize the stoical and unemotional manner of the oriental.”<sup>39</sup> Asian monolids were thus regarded by Millard as unattractive and threatening due to them creating a “passive expression”. He also characterizes Koreans as unemotional based on the mono eyelid facial feature and that it would appear too foreign for the Americans back home. Millard thus changed the appearance of the eyelids of these Korean brides to make them more ‘Western’ so they could assimilate better into American society.

That blepharoplasty has become the most sought-after procedure in South Korea since its origin in the 1960s, speaks to the enormous influence that Western standards of beauty combined with political hegemony still have today on Korean society. But eyelid surgery is not the only example, of course, another very popular cosmetic surgery is rhinoplasty, which is a nose operation. The look many Asian patients go for is to make the nose more narrow and projecting, therefore looking less than a common Asian nose and more like a Western nose. A third popular procedure is a skin-whitening treatment in order to appear lighter in complexion. For K-pop idols, make-up artists and directors also often use make-up shades that are too light for their natural complexion or use lighting that makes them appear lighter than they actually are under natural light. Photos are also edited to make their complexion lighter, which then sometimes results in clever editors that undo the filters and edits placed upon the image in order to call out the whitewashing practices.

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<sup>38</sup> Angela Kim, “Blepharoplasty as Domestication of the Asian: Constructing Korean Identities by White Hands,” *UCLA: Center for the Study of Women* (2018): 1. [https://escholarship.org/content/qt5tx5g8b2/qt5tx5g8b2\\_noSplash\\_b04b739b3f3417b356680f88b33ca63d.pdf?t=p8d07x](https://escholarship.org/content/qt5tx5g8b2/qt5tx5g8b2_noSplash_b04b739b3f3417b356680f88b33ca63d.pdf?t=p8d07x).

<sup>39</sup> Ralph Millard, "The Oriental Eyelid and Its Surgical Revision." *The American Journal of Ophthalmology* 57, no. 4 (1964): 647. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/0002-9394\(64\)92512-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0002-9394(64)92512-7).

An overwhelming amount of K-pop idols have the aforementioned physical traits that are not necessarily very common in Asian people but are in White people. This is not to say that idols undergo these surgeries and procedures to ‘look White’, but rather that the desire for certain features in K-pop idols is based on beauty ideals and standards that have been created by decades of Western cultural and political hegemony in the Asian continent. This, however, remains a contested subject, as many defenders of these procedures and beauty standards claim that people simply undergo them to look like their favorite celebrities, not to make themselves more European in appearance.<sup>40</sup>

However, idols do tend to have a look that appeals to the Eurocentric aesthetic but has obvious accents of the East. Again, foreign enough to be thrilling, exotic, and appealing, but not too foreign to become strange and alarming. This can be seen in physical features that appear again and again in K-pop idols. K-pop management companies know how to pick visuals to appeal to Western demographics. In the West, the beauty standards for men are typically to be tall, muscular, and possess dark features like hair and eyes. The “tall, dark, and handsome” stereotype as it has become known in popular culture over the years. For women, it includes “being thin and tall, having long hair, having light/tanned skin, having big breasts, large eyes, a small nose, and high cheekbones”.<sup>41</sup> A lot of these beauty standards that exist in the West today stem from European colonization, due to the longstanding hegemony and influence the Europeans had on the areas they colonized, including the modern-day United States and by proxy South Korea, who came under American influence after the end of World War II.<sup>42</sup>

Of course, not every Westerner finds these exact traits to be attractive as every individual has their own definition of attractiveness. These beauty standards are not all-powerful in relation to what people consider to be beautiful. When comparing these standards to the general look that K-pop idols possess, however, it becomes apparent that many of them possess these traits that will enable them to appeal to a Western audience. Most groups will have at least one member that is there to be visually appealing to the international fandom. An easy ‘gateway member’ that allows international fans to become invested in the group.

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<sup>40</sup> Kim, “Blepharoplasty as Domestication,” 3.

<sup>41</sup> Toby Chen, Kristina Lian, Daniella Lorenzana, Naima Shahzad and Reinesse Wong, “Occidentalisation of Beauty Standards: Eurocentrism in Asia,” *Across The Spectrum of Socioeconomics* 1, no. 2 (2020): 2. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4325856>.

<sup>42</sup> Chent et al, “Occidentalisation of Beauty,” 9.

There are many examples of idols that adhere to traditional Western standards of beauty and who have come forward to share their remarkable audition stories. In the K-pop industry, potential idols are scouted on the street or will sign up for an audition in hopes to be signed by an entertainment company as a trainee; a K-pop idol in training, if you will. Usually, these auditions will require people to sing, dance, play musical instruments, or act, yet some of the most popular K-pop idols internationally never had to do any of this. NCT's Lucas has reenacted his audition process in the Korean variety show JTBC's "Ask Us Anything." When asked to share his story on how he came to Korea to become a singer, Lucas showed the show's hosts three poses and told them that was all the casting directors needed to see for him to immediately pass the audition for SM Entertainment, one of the three biggest and most influential entertainment companies in the history of K-pop.<sup>43</sup> Lucas then went on to say, as an answer to the question if he had to show anything else at all, that he did not have to sing or dance during the audition and that he joined the audition for fun because he was close by so he had not prepared something regardless.<sup>44</sup> Lucas, coincidentally, possesses many traits that Westerners generally consider to be attractive. He is tall, muscular, and has thick dark eyebrows. Also, his big and round eyes allow him to appear somewhat racially ambiguous. He is still clearly of Asian descent, but certain features allow him to appear Western in his aesthetic. It therefore seems that his instant success during the audition was closely related to the inherent appeal to certain demographics he possesses.

It is also important here to recognize K-pop's transnational dimension. While the genre is short for Korean popular music, many of the contributors in the production process are often not Korean at all. Producers and songwriters are contracted and flown in from all over the world to write addictive songs and international choreographers are hired to come up with catchy dance moves. Even the idols themselves are often not Korean, with entertainment companies holding auditions in countries outside of Korea to scout promising talent and recruit them. Especially in recent years, this has resulted in more and more idols debuting who previous to their trainee period had perhaps never set foot in South Korea and did not speak the Korean language at all.

These idols can be divided largely into two categories: (1) people with a (partial) Korean ethnicity that were born and grew up in a country outside South Korea. Examples are

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<sup>43</sup> S. Park, "NCT's Lucas Reveals How He Passed SM Entertainment Auditions With Ease," *Soompi*, August 18, 2018, <https://www.soompi.com/article/1216981wpp/ncts-lucas-reveals-passed-sm-entertainment-auditions-ease>.

<sup>44</sup> S. Park, "NCT Lucas."

Straykids' Bang Chan and Felix that hail from Australia, P1Harmony's Keeho and NCT's Mark from Canada, and Girls Generation's Tiffany and Jessica who were both born and raised in the United States. There are, of course, countless others; (2) people who are not ethnically Korean at all. Many K-pop idols are actually Japanese, like Le Sserafim's Kazuha and Sakura, or Chinese, like GOT7's Jackson Wang or Dreamcatcher's Handong. While the examples are fewer, there are also idols who hail from a country outside of the East Asia region. Blackpink's Lisa and (G)I-DLE's Minnie both hail from Thailand, Secret Number's Dita is Indonesian, and NewJeans's Hanni is Vietnamese. But what these foreign idols all have in common is an appearance that makes them, for lack of a better term, relatively easy to be 'Korean passing' in Western eyes. It is very rare to see an idol that does not at least appear East Asian or who is even not Asian at all, and if you do see them, they are usually not very popular.

What this seems to indicate is that while K-pop is made with a lot of talent from outside of South Korea, to its Western consumers it still has to appear Korean. It is a strictly guarded and carefully manufactured image so it will always be easily recognizable as Korean, even when there are so many foreign components in its production. It also corroborates Orientalist ideas that emphasize perceived Asian 'sameness'. This is the idea that Asian people all look alike and have no discernible features that can distinguish them from one another, like eye color or hair color and texture. This is also known as the "cross-race" effect, where people are exponentially better at distinguishing members of their own ethnicity or race than members of others.

I argue that K-pop is aware of this and uses the effect to its advantage. By being able to pass off any idol that looks vaguely East Asian as Korean to the general Western audience, they still can promote and brand their artists as K-pop, even if some groups do not have any Korean members at all. Examples are SM Entertainment's WayV which entirely consists of members of Chinese descent and JYP Entertainment's NiziU which is completely Japanese. In an interview with the Korea Times, professor of cultural anthropology Lee Gyu-tag had the following explanation for this phenomenon: "K-pop has become a source of national pride for numerous Koreans, so they do not want to see record labels taking away their music to elsewhere."<sup>45</sup> Korea wants the global market to recognize something as an exclusively Korean product in order to prevent other countries from being able to copy the formula and start promoting their own artists in the same way as K-pop artists. Due to K-pop's insistence

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<sup>45</sup> Dong Sun-hwa, "K-pop groups without Koreans," *The Korea Times*, September 7, 2020. [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2020/09/732\\_295580.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2020/09/732_295580.html).

that it is a Korean product, even when it is not, the industry enables a strong association in its fans that only Korea can produce genuine K-pop acts and other countries who try are just cheap imitations, even when they use the exact same idol training system and use talent heralding from the non-Korean countries the K-pop industry itself is holding its auditions in to scout and fly talent to Korea to become a trainee.

K-pop is currently one of South Korea's biggest export products, with the value of South Korean music exports estimated at around 776 million US dollars in 2021.<sup>46</sup> It is therefore no wonder why they are so liberal with the K-pop term when it comes to their own produced artists and groups, but are very strict and apathetic when it comes to groups that follow the K-pop formula that were not produced in South Korea itself. As long as South Korea can claim it for themselves it is perfectly fine to label a non-Korean artist as K-pop because they will benefit from the association international fans will have to its perceived 'Korean-ness' through tourism, purchase of Korean products, interest in Korean culture, and providing a segway to consuming other forms of Korean entertainment like K-dramas. If fans feel like the Korean style would be removed from K-pop, they would feel disoriented and disrupted.<sup>47</sup>

K-pop thus seems to have discovered a successful formula for itself. By scouting talent domestically as well as internationally, they create a large pool of potential new talent to keep pushing the industry forward as well as foster direct ties to an international market through the inherent appeal of non-Korean idols to their country of origin. The Western influence of Korean standards of beauty is also being used to the industry's advantage, through the deliberate scouting of idols who can appeal to the Western market with their appearance. The Orientalist idea of Asian 'same-ness' also aids the powerful K-pop branding in allowing the genre to stay clear and coherent in the eyes of foreign markets and keeps the K-pop brand strongly associated with South Korea, which in turn brings the country enormous benefits as can be seen in the rise in interest in other South Korean products and culture, like the Korean language and K-dramas. By taking a transnational approach to its production yet branding it as a Korean product to its consumer, the K-pop industry has seemed to strike gold.

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<sup>46</sup> "Value of music industry exports from South Korea from 2005 to 2021," *Statistica*, April 21, 2023.

<sup>47</sup> Dong, "groups without Koreans."

### Chapter 3: Fandoms Driven by Competition and Parasocial Relationships

In June 2020, Black Lives Matter protests swept the globe in the wake of the death of George Floyd, an African American man that fell victim to police brutality at the end of May. In reaction to the debate that heated up online due to the protests, K-pop fans flooded hashtags associated with racist rhetoric such as #WhiteLivesMatter with video clips and memes of their favorite idols, often accompanied by anti-racist messaging.<sup>48</sup> In doing so, they drowned out the racist and offensive posts by the opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement by rendering popular hashtags completely void of their original content.<sup>49</sup> Instead, these hashtags were full of video footage of K-pop group BTS and other idols.

In response to this social media bombardment, BTS took to Twitter on June 4 and tweeted the following message: “We stand against racial discrimination. We condemn violence. You, I and we all have the right to be respected. We will stand together. #BlackLivesMatter.”<sup>50</sup> Later that day, it was reported that the group donated a million dollars to the Black Lives Matter Foundation. In reaction to these developments, the BTS fandom, known collectively as the ARMY, began trending #MatchAMillion on Twitter. The fan-driven social media campaign implored fans to donate what they could so they could match the donation made by BTS themselves. They reached this goal in less than twenty-four hours.<sup>51</sup>

These two fan-driven campaigns on the social media platform Twitter give an impression of the power of the international K-pop fandom when mobilized for a good cause. Their infamous intensity was turned towards a commendable goal, but this is not always the case. While the love, admiration, and dedication K-pop idols receive from their fans have propelled the genre onto the global stage, the intensity of the fandom does not come without its consequences.

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<sup>48</sup> Justin McCurry, “How US K-pop fans became a political force to be reckoned with,” *The Guardian*, June 24, 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jun/24/how-us-k-pop-fans-became-a-political-force-to-be-recognized-with-blm-donald-trump>

<sup>49</sup> Justin McCurry, “K-pop fans join forces to drown out opposition to #BlackLivesMatter,” *The Guardian*, June 5, 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jun/05/k-pop-fans-join-forces-to-drown-out-racist-online-content>

<sup>50</sup> 방탄소년단 (@BTS\_twt), “We stand against racial discrimination,” Twitter, June 4, 2020.

[https://twitter.com/BTS\\_twt/status/1268422690336935943?s=20](https://twitter.com/BTS_twt/status/1268422690336935943?s=20)

<sup>51</sup> Bryan Rolli, “BTS ARMY Matched The Group’s \$1 Million Black Lives Matter Donation, Proving The Positive Power Of Fandoms,” *Forbes*, June 8, 2020.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrolli/2020/06/08/bts-army-black-lives-matter-1-million-donation/?sh=4fbf03fe6465>

In the previous chapters, I have demonstrated several ways in which the K-pop industry deliberately markets to Western audiences through musical as well as visual dimensions. This chapter will look at the fandom level and how the way K-pop interacts with its fans is inextricably linked to its success, going as far as arguing that K-pop fandom is the ribbon that ties the whole package together.

In order to properly dive into specific aspects and achievements of K-pop fandom it is important to grasp how it works, what drives it, and what makes it unique from the way fandoms of Western music artists operate. Before everything, it is vital to understand that, by nature, fan activity is incredibly competitive in the K-pop scene. This is due to the way success is measured in the industry; through album sales, music chart rankings, merchandise sales, views on music videos, event tickets sold, and the number of streams on music releases. These hard numbers provide fans with tangible and concrete goals to achieve which they can work towards. It mobilizes the fandom of a K-pop artist towards a common goal: getting those numbers as high as possible and perhaps even breaking the previously held sales or streaming record so their favorite idol can hold the top position.

Coincidentally, almost a lot of these measures of success require the fans to invest a lot of money into their support. So even more than its Western counterpart, the Korean music industry is centered around money. The K-pop fandom is therefore much more driven by consumerism than its Western counterpart, where physical and digital album sales, for example, have been dwindling for years. According to figures released by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), CD sales brought in \$483 million in recorded music revenues in 2022.<sup>52</sup> This is an 18% drop compared to the year prior, continuing its downward trend.<sup>53</sup> Digital downloads are also declining in the West, which dropped 20% in 2022.<sup>54</sup> Digital album sales and individual track sales accounted for barely 3% of American recorded music revenues that year, compared to 43% in 2012, ten years prior.<sup>55</sup>

When looking at album sales in the K-pop industry, almost the opposite is true; K-pop albums sell better than ever before. According to the Global Album Sales Chart 2022, published by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), a staggering eight out of ten positions on that chart were held by K-pop albums.<sup>56</sup> BTS' career-spanning

<sup>52</sup> Joshua P. Friedlander and Matthew Bass, "Year-End 2022 RIAA Revenue Statistics," *RIAA*, March 9, 2023, <https://www.riaa.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2022-Year-End-Music-Industry-Revenue-Report.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Friedlander and Bass, "RIAA Revenue."

<sup>54</sup> Friedlander and Bass, "RIAA Revenue."

<sup>55</sup> Friedlander and Bass, "RIAA Revenue."

<sup>56</sup> "IFPI Global Charts," IFPI, accessed June 27, 2023,

compilation album “Proof” ended up in second place on the IFPI chart and was the best-selling K-pop album of that year, having sold a staggering 3,300,000 units worldwide in both digital and physical album sales combined.<sup>57</sup>

Fans will look to all available avenues to support their favorite artist and see in album sales another goal to achieve for their idol. The way fandoms try to compete with each other becomes obvious through observing how often a record is broken. BTS’ album “MAP OF THE SOUL: 7” held the record for the highest first-day sales for over three years with 2.65 million copies sold.<sup>58</sup> On April 24, 2023, Seventeen’s mini album “FML” broke that record by a wide margin with 3.99 million copies sold on its first day.<sup>59</sup> A little over a month later, Stray Kids released their album “5-STAR”, surpassing 5.13 million preorders, smashing the record set by Seventeen a month prior.<sup>60</sup> Fandoms constantly try to outdo each other in their quest to be the most loyal fans. Being the best fandom is a competition in the K-pop scene, much more than fandoms of Western artists compete with each other.

Another essential and unique aspect of the K-pop industry are the music shows, which constitute an integral component of the Korean popular music industry by providing a platform for the promotion, performance, and evaluation of K-pop artists and their music. These shows air year-round on every day of the week except Monday and are televised programs that feature live performances, interviews, and competitive segments, offering a significant avenue for artists to showcase their talent and engage with their fan base. These shows are characterized by several key elements. First and foremost, they are centered around live performances, emphasizing the visual and musical aspects of the artists' presentations. These performances often incorporate intricate choreography, elaborate stage designs, and cutting-edge production values, aiming to captivate audiences. They also employ various competitive segments that allow artists to compete for accolades, such as weekly chart rankings, trophies, and recognition. These rankings are determined through a combination of factors, including audience votes, digital and physical sales, and professional assessments.

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<https://www.ifpi.org/our-industry/global-charts/>.

<sup>57</sup> “BTS albums and songs sales,” Chartmaster, June 21, 2022,

<https://chartmasters.org/bts-albums-and-songs-sales/#:~:text=In%20the%20example%20of%20Proof,it%20sold%203%2C300%2C000%20units%20worldwide>.

<sup>58</sup> Rika-go, “The Six K-pop albums with the highest first-day sales in Hanteo history,” *Allkpop*, May 15, 2023,

<https://www.allkpop.com/article/2023/05/the-six-k-pop-albums-with-the-highest-first-day-sales-in-hanteo-history>.

<sup>59</sup> Allkpop, “highest first day sales.”

<sup>60</sup> Mandy Dalugdug, “Stray Kids break K-pop sales record, achieving over 5.1M pre-orders for their new album 5-STAR,” *Music Business Worldwide*, June 5, 2023,

<https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/stray-kids-just-overtook-seventeens-k-pop-album-sales-record-with-over-5-1m-pre-orders/>.

The way success is measured differs from show to show, allowing the competition to always remain exciting. An automatic win for an artist who holds the number one spot in the Korean music charts would make for very boring television. This competitive nature of K-pop music shows not only adds excitement and suspense but also contributes to the cultivation of fan loyalty and engagement. Dedicated fans actively participate in supporting their favorite artists by attending live recordings, voting for them, or hyping them up on social media to increase views on the performances which are always uploaded to YouTube immediately after recording.

The only way to promote music in K-pop is to go on these music shows and compete. Combining this with a relatively small and oversaturated market where artists are fairly directly comparable to each other due to the similar training and debuting system they all go through drives the competition to even more extreme levels. So how do K-pop artists and their management make sure their group stays on top and fans keep being engaged and loyal enough to keep streaming and buying their products?

This is where the key aspect of K-pop's fan culture comes into play, namely the strong parasocial relationships formed between fans and idols. As mentioned before, parasocial relationships are one-sided emotional connections fans develop with media figures, such as celebrities or K-pop idols, based on the perception of a genuine connection, despite the lack of reciprocity. They are characterized by one-sided emotional attachment and can lead to emotional dependency when fans rely heavily on their idols for validation, happiness, and a sense of belonging. What makes K-pop unique in this regard compared to the Western music industry, is that the K-pop industry actively encourages idols to foster these kinds of relationships with their fans in order to establish a sense of loyalty and to ensure engagement. This is often done by producing content that depicts idols in a relatable light, for example through vlogs, company videos from the time they were trainees, and doing day-to-day activities. The Western music industry upholds more of a barrier between the artists and their fans with regard to their personal life.

In the K-pop industry, that barrier is barely there. Perhaps one of the most significant platforms in this regard is VLIVE, which is a popular live-streaming and video platform specifically designed for Korean entertainment. The platform allows K-pop idols to engage with their fans on a more personal level, offering an intimate and interactive experience. Through VLIVE, artists can host live broadcasts where they can perform, share updates about their activities, and communicate directly with their fans through live chats and comments. Fans have the opportunity to leave comments, send virtual gifts, and participate in polls,

creating a sense of real-time interaction and connection. VLIVE also frequently collaborates with artists and their agencies to organize special events, such as fan meetings, live Q&A sessions, and exclusive behind-the-scenes glimpses.

In an interview with ENVI on the topic of parasocial relationships in K-pop, post-graduate student Kai H, who specializes in the Koreas and Digital Humanities, had the following to say about VLIVE:

“The biggest contributor wasn’t that idols put things on their social media and such — that had been happening for ages. In my personal opinion, what threw a bucket load of gasoline on the fire was VLIVE. It removed the time between content created and content posted. It removed the language barrier, it took labor from fan-translators. It made content super easy to find and tune into. Bringing the idols closer than before, and because of the subtitling system, which is pretty quick if not almost instant, there is no reason to feel disconnected as a fan.”<sup>61</sup>

As Kai also indicates, VLIVE provides a platform for direct social interaction between fans and idols. This illusion of a very small or non-existent barrier between the two parties is essential for the emotional connection that is necessary to form a strong parasocial relationship. Especially because the barriers are actually very big, as Western audiences are living in completely different parts of the world than their favorite idols and cannot simply fly to Korea every time they want to see them or crave interaction. That is where VLIVE comes into play. Idols need to feel as close to fans as their real-life friends do and through all this content that is published in addition to VLIVE streams and interactions, fans can truly be made to feel like they know everything about this idol and completely understand them on a personal level.

Fans also become very attached to their favorite idols because they provide an environment of escapism for them from their daily lives.<sup>62</sup> As a temporary break from reality, they can dive into the world of K-pop by binge-watching shows that feature their idols, dance practices, music videos, and interviews, among other things. This ‘break’ that K-pop can provide for fans can create a strong personal bond, even if fans are aware that they do not

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<sup>61</sup> Veronica Espinal, “Parasocial Relationships in K-Pop: Emotional Support Capitalism,” *ENVI*, February 21, 2021. <https://www.envimedia.co/parasocial-relationships-k-pop/>.

<sup>62</sup> Ayuni M. Jenol and Hafeeza A. Pazil, “Escapism and motivation: Understanding K-pop fans well-being and identity,” *Malaysian Journal of Society and Space* 16, no. 4, (November 2020): 341, <https://doi.org/10.17576/geo-2020-1604-25>.

really know an idol personally.<sup>63</sup> This is due to fans' positive connection with their idols because many feel like engaging with K-pop content is a 'reward'.<sup>64</sup> It is something they experience as fun. Something they can engage with in an easily accessible virtual environment to escape possible fears and despair they face in the real world.<sup>65</sup>

Fans look up to their idols not only for their skills, appearance, and entertainment value but also because they hold adoration for their behavior.<sup>66</sup> They regard them as their role models and sometimes even their friends due to the direct interaction platforms like VLIVE facilitate. Additionally, many idols have had to work very hard and train for years in order to be able to make their debut and even then there are not always successful. Idols have had to give up their ordinary life and trade it for long hours of training, strict body maintenance, and constraints on their social life. On top of that, their behavior and performance are closely monitored by their management. The way many idols have had to work their way to success is inspiring for many people and these "Cinderella stories" are actively admired by fans.<sup>67</sup> Actively promoting content that emphasizes an idol struggling or overcoming hardships appears to garner a lot of positive responses from fans. It makes them sympathetic to the average everyday fan and shows the humanity behind all the perfectly stylized music videos and appearances.

Additionally, idols are usually all very kind role models. The songs in the genre usually contain little to no curse words, idols refrain from making controversial political statements, and they always make sure to engage in a respectful and friendly way with their fans through regular fan-meeting events and live streams on social media.

These three factors can give some insight into why K-pop fans are so protective of their idols. A sense of escapism through the content they provide in combination with genuine admiration for them as a person and for their backstory appears to be the perfect recipe for an intensely loyal fanbase. It cannot be understated how much of your popularity in K-pop hinges on a perfect image because that recipe for success fails when that image is tainted. If an idol is caught up in a scandal of any kind or accused of displaying problematic behavior, that directly goes against the views and expectations their fans have of them, and the consequences can be dire.

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<sup>63</sup> Jenol and Pazil, "Escapism and motivation," 342.

<sup>64</sup> Ko Nusta Carranza, Jeong-Nam Kim, Song I. No, and Ronald Gobbi Simoes, "The Korean wave Hallyu in looking at escapism in Peruvian society," *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 13, no. 3 (2014): 338, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691497-12341305>.

<sup>65</sup> Jenol and Pazil, "Escapism and motivation," 342.

<sup>66</sup> Jenol and Pazil, "Escapism and motivation," 343.

<sup>67</sup> Jenol and Pazil, "Escapism and motivation," 344.

In April 2022, entertainment companies Source Music and Hybe Labels announced their new girl group Le Sserafim. During this month they would reveal each member of the upcoming group. Almost immediately after the sixteen-year-old Kim Ga-ram was announced as a member of Le Sserafim, allegations of bullying and bad behavior in school began piling in. People were claiming that Ga-ram bullied her classmates and that the bullying had also turned physically violent before. These accusations were, at first, firmly denied by Ga-ram's management, who even claimed to have "taken legal action against the spread of unilateral and distorted allegations and false information related to this case."<sup>68</sup> However, after the Korean law firm Daeryun confirmed that details of leaked school records detailing the alleged bullying overlapped with the experience of their client, Ga-ram's alleged victim, it was announced a few days later that Ga-ram would be put on an indefinite hiatus from the group. By then, the group was active for a little under three weeks before she was pulled from the group. Two months later it was announced that Source Music and Hybe Labels would terminate Ga-ram's contract and that she would not be returning to Le Sserafim.<sup>69</sup>

At this point, the bullying and other related allegations were not yet proven, but the companies terminated the contract anyway. The K-pop community had been dominated by discourse surrounding the allegations of Kim Ga-ram; there were fans vehemently defending her and opposition just as loud that was calling for her removal. Every time Le Sserafim was mentioned, it was in the same vein as Ga-ram's bullying controversy. Not wanting to risk the future of their new group by welcoming back a controversial member, regardless if the allegations were proven or not, the company made the decision to terminate her exclusive contract. A few months later, the allegations were indeed proven false, but by then it was too late for Kim Ga-ram, her career in K-pop was over before it truly began.

This situation gives an example of how an idol can completely lose their career due to problematic behavior, even alleged. If their reputation is tainted and they show themselves as less than perfect to their fans, they are not an idol anymore but just a regular person. They essentially "lose" that perfect role model status that is essential to a career as an idol, as previously demonstrated. The fans' opinion of an idol is paramount in the K-pop scene, much more so than in the Western music market, where fans have not come to expect perfect

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<sup>68</sup> L. Kim, "Source Music Releases Statement Denying School Bullying Rumors Against LE SSERAFIM's Kim Garam," *Soompi*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.soompi.com/article/1520824wpp/source-music-releases-statement-denying-school-bullying-g-rumors-against-le-sserafims-kim-garam>.

<sup>69</sup> Jon Blistein, "K-Pop Group Le Sserafim Drops Member Kim Ga-ram After Bullying Allegations," *Rolling Stone*, July 20, 2022, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/le-sserafim-kim-garam-bullying-accusation-1385886/>.

behavior at all times from their artists. There are even Western artists that have displayed extremely problematic or even borderline criminal behavior and still go on to have a very successful career. Think of Chris Brown, for example, who physically assaulted his then-girlfriend Rihanna in 2009 and still has a fruitful career in the music industry. Such a thing is unthinkable in the K-pop world.

Yet there is also an argument to make that contradicts the strict expectations fans place on their idols. Stemming from the intense protectiveness fans feel for their idols is the lack of culture for accountability regarding problematic behavior or otherwise problematic situations involving idols. K-pop fan culture leaves little room for the expression of any negative opinions or even constructive criticism. When people express their criticism on social media of an idol, music video, song, or outfit, the comment is frequently flocked with protective fans who immediately accuse the person of being an anti-fan. Often shortened to anti, this is a term used in K-pop fandom to describe someone who hates a particular idol or group to a degree that they devote their time to mocking and criticizing that artist. Someone who follows the activities of an artist not because they like or love them, but because they hate everything about them and want to be vocal about it.

While there are, of course, people who actually are so-called antis and find enjoyment in leaving hate comments, much of the criticism uttered in these social media communities is often just fans discussing their opinions on a release from a certain artist or a topic regarding K-pop as a whole. The intention appears not to be hateful, but rather to find like-minded individuals who are willing to discuss a topic in a constructive and respectful manner. The comment or content is thus a conversation starter rather than a hate comment.

Yet this kind of negative discourse can be found everywhere in online K-pop communities across various social media platforms. These acts can get so brutal and personal due to the way some fans tie their personal identity to their fan identity,<sup>70</sup> meaning that any criticism towards their idol is perceived as a direct attack on the fan as a person. The fan has gone to great lengths for their idol because they deem them to be perfect role models and aspirational. Criticism takes away from that perceived righteous justification that fans feel in indulging in K-pop fan activities and purchases.<sup>71</sup>

The immediate shutdown of any negative opinions or even constructive criticism creates a sense of artificially inflated positivity in K-pop, where only opinions and posts that

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<sup>70</sup> Brittany Tinaliga, "At War for OPPA and Identity": Competitive Performativity among Korean-Pop Fandoms," (MA thesis, The University of San Francisco, 2018): 28.

<sup>71</sup> Tinaliga, "OPPA and Identity," 28.

will praise the idol are tolerated and any criticism is immediately drowned out by fans who take it upon themselves to defend their idol. Here an important aspect of parasocial interaction comes into play; the idols never request this kind of behavior. This action is completely driven by fans who feel the need to defend the person they have formed such a personal bond with, even if that person does not even know they exist.

Entertainment agencies are remarkably hands-off when it comes to fandom conduct. Brittany Tinaliga, a scholar associated with the University of San Francisco, called this type of hands-off approach a “hovering-hands policy”.<sup>72</sup> Tinaliga attributed this name to the handling of fan conduct by entertainment companies due to its performative nature. While it appears they have rules and regulations in place, in practice they do very little. This is much like the hover-hand photo pose Tinaliga is referencing in the term, in which someone wraps an arm around a companion without actually touching their companion’s body, yet in the picture it seems like they do.

The extent of the conduct policies in this area is usually very practical and contains itself to the domestic market, such as how many fans are allowed at certain events or whether or not fans are allowed to bring gifts for their idols, or pursuing legal action domestically due to defamation claims.<sup>73</sup> When it comes to the global level, entertainment companies do essentially nothing to stimulate healthy fan conduct, so it is no wonder that toxic behavior remains if there is no one with authority to address these issues.<sup>74</sup> Toxic behavior also rarely gets called out by the idols themselves, as they have to retain a perfect image and cannot take the risk to appear combative or ungrateful of their fans’ efforts, lest they lose their popularity and sales will dwindle. While the parasocial interaction tactic has its negative consequences, discouraging it would mean quitting their most successful marketing strategy that brings the industry enormous amounts of money. It is obvious that this is not going to happen any time soon.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how K-pop uses an enormously effective marketing strategy that encourages idols to foster strong parasocial relationships with their fans, in order to inspire intense fan loyalty that spurs them to support their favorite idols through all sorts of avenues. This type of emotional capitalism brings the K-pop industry huge profits. By promoting a wealth of content and merchandise for fans to consume and purchase and combining it with a competitive atmosphere and culture, fandoms will

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<sup>72</sup> Tinaliga, “OPPA and Identity,” 4.

<sup>73</sup> Tinaliga, “OPPA and Identity,” 3.

<sup>74</sup> Tinaliga, “OPPA and Identity,” 4.

constantly try to outdo themselves and others in their quest to be the best fans, or alternatively, to be the best 'friends' as they feel personally connected to their idols. This marketing tactic has proved itself to be enormously successful, as K-pop fans are some of the most intense and loyal fandoms, sometimes to a degree that can descend into toxicity like feeling overly protective of or entitled to idols or attacking others online that have an opinion that differs from their own about a topic pertaining to K-pop.

## Conclusion

This thesis has explored the strategies employed by the K-pop industry to successfully market itself to American and Western audiences that have resulted in the genre's recent boom in popularity. Through an examination of transnationalism and orientalism on the musical and visual level and the importance of parasocial relationships and fandom dynamics, valuable insights have been gained into the multifaceted factors contributing to K-pop's success in Western markets.

Firstly, transnationalism emerged as a critical aspect of K-pop's marketing strategies. The industry embraced globalized production, distribution, and fandom networks, leveraging digital platforms, social media, and international collaborations to extend its reach beyond national borders. Starting with its origins in the 1990s with Seo Taji and Boys, K-pop has always been open to new influences from outside its own musical tradition in order to create a new and exciting genre. By moving with global music trends they are able to capitalize on current audience interest while still giving the music and its visual production a K-pop flair through its eclectic musical style, synchronized choreography, and fashion-forward styling. The use of the Korean language is, of course, also an important factor in what makes K-pop unique, yet with its rising popularity in the West we also see many artists incorporating more English lyrics in their songs to appeal to a non-Korean audience. Some artists even go as far as releasing a completely English song, which in BTS' case turned out to be an excellent strategy as "Dynamite" and "Butter" became massive hits. This willingness to meet the Western market halfway has also become clear in the many collaborative efforts that have popped up in recent years with Western artists now more than willing to appear on K-pop songs and vice versa. It marks the shift of K-pop's position as a foreign trend-follower that tries to push itself into a global market to a new and exciting trendsetter that the West is trying to capitalize on. It speaks to the eroding of the Western cultural hegemony in an increasingly globalized society.

Additionally, K-pop capitalized on elements of Korean culture and aesthetics that were perceived as exotic and novel, catering to Western audiences' fascination with the East. Yet its idols are not foreign enough to be alarming, as K-pop idols adhere to certain beauty standards that have their origins in Western cultural hegemony but can now be used to their advantage due to their similarity in what Western audiences like and look for in their celebrities. As demonstrated by the story of NCT's Lucas, idols are sometimes even scouted based on their inherent appeal to an international audience. K-pop is thus very transnational

in nature but its branding remains strictly Korean. K-pop has become a sense of pride and a source of economic prosperity for South Korea, as it has become one of the country's most important cultural export products. It is therefore paramount that the brand remains something international audience associate with South Korea in particular and not grow to see it for what it truly is, a transnational collaborative effort. This strategic blending of Eastern and Western influences, combined with meticulous Korean branding, allowed K-pop to carve a unique niche in the Western music industry, capturing the attention and curiosity of audiences.

Finally, the cultivation of parasocial relationships emerged as a powerful marketing tool within K-pop. The industry harnessed the potential of social media platforms, live interactions, and behind-the-scenes content to foster a sense of intimacy and connection between artists and fans. By allowing fans glimpses into their personal lives and creating interactive opportunities, K-pop artists nurtured dedicated fan bases and engendered a sense of loyalty and emotional investment. The role of fandom cannot be understated in K-pop's success. Fandoms played a crucial part in spreading K-pop's influence, employing fan-driven promotional campaigns, streaming initiatives, and passionate engagement in online communities. These expertly crafted and devoted fan bases propelled K-pop artists to the forefront of Western music markets, generating buzz, chart success, and an ever-expanding global fan community.

As K-pop continues to evolve and captivate Western markets, further research is needed to explore its long-term impact on cultural dynamics, fan communities, and the global music industry as a whole. It would be valuable to conduct a comparative study of K-pop's marketing strategies in different Western countries (e.g., United States, United Kingdom, Australia) to examine variations in audience reception, cultural adaptation, and market success. This would provide insights into how localization efforts and cultural nuances impact the success and popularity of K-pop in specific Western markets. Perhaps something that works really well in the United States does not necessarily work in a European country, An example of a research topic to look into would be the reception of English language K-pop songs in native English-speaker communities versus countries that do not have English as their official language.

Especially with the current rise of the social media platform TikTok, it would be interesting to examine the impact this platform has had on the K-pop industry in a few years, as I think it is still too early to draw clear conclusions. With TikTok making trend cycles go even faster with its focus on short-form content, I hypothesize that this will also influence the

trend cycles in K-pop. Many idols are very active on TikTok because social media remains an integral part of interaction with their fandom, as has been demonstrated in this thesis. The K-pop industry is already a highly competitive and oversaturated market that constantly tries to do something new to captivate audiences and remain relevant in a sea of other competitors who try to do the same. TikTok speeding up these trend cycles massively drives the need for innovation to a frenzy and I wonder how long the current system will hold before it is all going to explode.

In conclusion, the recent boom of K-pop in Western markets can be attributed to a confluence of strategic factors. Transnationalism enabled the genre's expansion beyond national boundaries, while strong visual branding awakened further audience fascination with Korean culture. Parasocial relationships fostered a sense of closeness and engagement, and the active participation of fandoms fueled K-pop's popularity. Together, these strategies have successfully positioned K-pop as a global phenomenon, highlighting the industry's adaptability, innovation, and ability to capture the imaginations of audiences worldwide.

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