

## 10 The BTS Phenomenon

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Igniting the hearts of global fans with their chimeric personas – angelic, mournful, intellectual, mischievous, suave, approachable, and tempestuous all at once – the seven members of BTS have become some of the most sensational figures in millennial pop culture. Since they debuted as up-and-coming underdogs to the K-pop establishment in 2013, BTS has not only become the most successful group in the history of K-pop but also emerged as a major force to be reckoned with on the global music scene. With every release of their songs and albums, BTS has started a new chapter in the K-pop history book: They were sought-after guests attracting an army of cheering fans at major music award ceremonies in recent years, and in 2021, they reached a new height by becoming the first K-pop group nominated for a Grammy Award. That year was also notable for the group because they topped the Billboard Hot 100 chart for ten consecutive weeks with their single “Butter.” How did the band step into such unprecedented prominence for K-pop idols while defying the conventional rules of the K-pop industry?

Of the multitude of elements that drive BTS’s phenomenal success, authentic storytelling may be the most crucial. Before the rise of BTS, the pursuit of authenticity for idols was not regarded as the usual pathway to success. Since Korean popular music was introduced to the global music market under the banner of “K-pop,” the conventional strategy widely deployed by K-pop groups was to “localize” their production and marketing approach to adapt to foreign markets with distinctive cultural specificity and sensibility. BTS’s route to success had nothing to do with this model. The absence of the localization strategy resulted in the ironic situation of the reception and consumption of BTS appearing rather uniform and streamlined across the diverse nations and cultural blocs where their music circulated. BTS’s case proves that success in pop music is not simply attained by carefully calculated commercial strategy; rather, it shows that we need to look into more profound emotional rapport and relatability between the band and their fandom to understand the BTS phenomenon.

Authenticity is a concept that often evades close scrutiny and critical assessment, but on a basic level, it is closely related to the notion of the “real” (as opposed to “fake”). In the world of popular music in the West,

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the term has been specially associated with the genre of rock in the post-World War II era. As music historian Eliza Wald has noted,

From the beginning, though, one of the appeals of rock 'n' roll was its air of authenticity, the idea . . . that there was something “honest” about the voices of young black urbanites or rural Southerners that was missing from the polished studio hits that Mitch Miller and his peers [produced] . . . This was, after all, the era of Marlon Brando and James Dean, who moved young fans with the sincerity of their moody, inarticulate performances. When Miller argued that singers should project passion with technical expertise rather than feeling it personally, he was taking the same position as older actors who disdained the emotion-driven “method,” and teenagers preferred Elvis to the mainstream pop singers for much the same reasons they preferred Dean to the more traditionally glamorous movie stars.<sup>1</sup>

Wald's comparison between technically polished musicians and the rugged but sincere-sounding Elvis Presley – or to paraphrase it in terms of acting, between suave actors and sincere method actors – resonates closely with Richard Middleton's idea that “what distinguished authenticity in rock music was its emphasis on spontaneity and improvisation.”<sup>2</sup> It is also quite akin to John Lennon's often-cited 1971 *Rolling Stone* interview:

Rock and roll then [when I was fifteen] was real, everything else was unreal. The thing about rock and roll, good rock and roll – whatever good means and all that shit – is that it's real and realism gets through to you despite yourself. You recognize something in it which is true, like all true art. Whatever art is, readers. OK. If it's real, it's simple usually, and if it's simple, it's true. Something like that.<sup>3</sup>

The legendary figure's definition of rock authenticity of the 1950s West was in large part owned by the postwar generation, whose existential crisis in the popular cultural realm championed rugged and real heroes as champions of the time.

This dichotomy between authentic and manufactured pop may be analogous to the distinction between the ingenuous quality of BTS and supremely polished K-pop idols. Many fans find BTS's lyrics to be authentic, as they are imbued with philosophical depth that allows for contemplation of the precarities of life – the quality for which the band was dubbed “the voice of the millennial reality.”

In the world of classical music, authenticity may be gauged by how closely the given performance actualizes the canonical performance style, whereas in folk music, the local flavor of folklore and the rootedness of the people who inhabit that culture endow the genre with authenticity. The claim to musical authenticity can be made by aligning a new emergent genre with the preexisting one regarded as authentic. According to Wald,

such was the case in rock 'n' roll's association with folk: "By the mid-1960s, folk music was overtaking classical music as the favored listening for serious young intellectuals, so when rock 'n' roll was described as a folk style (by Belz, among others), that was a claim of roots and authenticity, not an invitation to transform it into something more elevated."<sup>4</sup>

Pop music, on the other hand, has different ways of cultivating an authentic aura, namely along the lines of whether the reality in which the artist resides is well communicated or not. Unlike the popular perception of BTS as a grassroots band that naturally emerged, the conventional wisdom surrounding most K-pop groups' origin is distanced from the notion of authenticity. The usual debut process for K-pop idols begins with their discovery by talent scouts, followed by rigorous training and performance production facilitated by entertainment companies. Such meticulously planned debuts create an impression that K-pop idols are not authentic artists. Especially in the United States, where the authenticity of rock, hip hop, and folk music comprises the absolute core value of popular music, K-pop idols inevitably face challenges when attempting to win the hearts and minds of the audience.

To be clear, BTS is not entirely an outlier to the K-pop industry standards; they share much with other successful K-pop groups in that they emphasize singing skills, visual presentation of their music, and captivating performances. Nonetheless, they managed to expand the parameters of K-pop. What sets BTS apart in particular is their lyrics. As writers of their own lyrics, the members of BTS sincerely express their struggle as students, celebrities, and Korean youth while exposing societal failures that hinder the younger generation from succeeding. Without any pretense, in a highly personal voice, they share who they are and where they come from. BTS may be the first K-pop group to have become a mainstream sensation in the world, and their relentless pursuit of authenticity has made them the most globally successful K-pop band.

In further exploring BTS's authenticity, their use of locally specific dialect revealing the place of their origin is noteworthy. Invoking an association with a genuine place is essential for grounding the band in realness, as musicologists Chris Gibson and John Connell once proclaimed.

Cultural origins for a scene or style can often be traced to particular groups of musicians, producers and audiences – specific contexts from which a "sound" develops and disseminates. The Motown sound relied on entrepreneurs like Berry Gordy and a specific set of songwriters and performers, as did Seattle grunge (with Sub Pop Records) and San Francisco psychedelia. Such "authenticity" in music begins with individual musicians and performers, who are seen as credible if they can trace their roots back to organic, local scenes.<sup>5</sup>

BTS trace their roots mostly through their adoption of “regional dialect rap (*saturi raep*).” A case in point, “Paldo Gangsan” (2013) – directly translated as “Rivers and Mountains of Eight Provinces,” a well-known poetic moniker for Korea – is their representative song relying on the distinctive charm of “regional dialect rap.”

Gaga gaga? I-reon ma-reun ana?  
 Gaeng-sang-do-neun eok-sidago? Nuga geu-kanoo? (meo-ra-ke-ssat-no?)  
 Gaeng-sang-do jeong-ha-mo! Anabada gateun-geo-ji!  
 Mo niga jikjeop waseo  
 Hanbeon bwa-ra! (A dae-ddama!)  
 Daegu meo-seu-ma-ra-seo! Du mal an-han-da-kai!  
 Hamo! Hamo! Gaeng-sang-do jwuik-in-da! A-in-gyo? (A-jura ma!)  
 Uriga eo-di nam-in-gyo!

Gaga gaga, do you know this expression?  
 You say Gyeongsang Province is rough? Who says so? (What are you taking about?)  
 Gyeongsang Province, *jeong-ha-mo*! It’s like “*anabada*.”<sup>6</sup>  
 Well, why don’t you visit  
 And see it for yourself! (Well, forget it!)  
 Boys of Daegu! They don’t need qualifications!  
 Wonderful, wonderful! Gyeongsang Province is the best! Isn’t that the case?  
 (Give it to the kids!)  
 Don’t say we are strangers!

The distinctive dialect of Gyeongsang Province, from which four members of BTS (Jimin, V, Suga, and Jeongguk) hail, is not easily translatable, as the pungent flavor of locality will inevitably be lost in the process. For Seoulites whose local dialect provides the notion of a standard Korean language, the original lyrics in Gyeongsang dialect exude humorous as well as exotic provinciality. In Korean hip-hop tradition, closely aligned with urbanity rather than distinctive regional characteristics, it is rare to come across regional dialects as in “Paldo Gangsan.” In this regard, BTS’s refreshing play with regional dialect simulates the “long-term historical continuity of performance as involved in folk and country music” or even the strategies of “the most commercial performers such as Bruce Springsteen, [who] cherished continuity with earlier popular music and evoked a sense of place.”<sup>7</sup> It intensifies the notion of their rootedness.

Much like Korean hip hop, mainstream K-pop music driven by idols shuns regional dialects, which are regarded as antithetical to the cosmopolitan and sophisticated image the K-pop industry strives to cultivate. But in the global tradition of hip hop, introducing the place of origin is an indispensable aspect of establishing the artists’ authenticity, as they become crucial vectors for addressing the central questions of identity.

BTS's deployment of regional dialect means that they are not shy about revealing their place of origin (Gyeongsang Province in this case) and their identity as Koreans. Much as with global hip-hop artists, various identitarian markers, including regional identity, anchor the foundation of BTS's music, which in turn closely resonates with their central themes of "Love Yourself" and "The Map of the Soul."

Hardly the only point of BTS's relatability, the linguistic charm embedded in the rich use of dialect is augmented by their storytelling ability. The magnetic power of BTS lies in how they present relatable stories of their journey as underdogs rising to the top through their sheer talent, hard work, camaraderie, and fan support. The construction of a powerful narrative and storytelling is not just an age-old device harking back to the age of oral tradition but a significant technique and asset needed in the age of digital communication.

The centrality of narrative power has been explored by economist Robert J. Shiller, whose thesis sheds light on how media contagion can take place on digital and social networks through influential storytelling. In *Narrative Economics*, Shiller advanced the notion that such storytelling is central to economic success. To ignore economic viability would be a disingenuous denial of the K-pop industry's main concerns, and in this regard, Shiller's work on the economic power of effective narratives presents notable insights for gauging BTS's success. Shiller posits that effective economic narratives defined by viral and contagious stories can alter people's economic planning. He elaborates further, emphasizing the significance of successful storytelling by (1) offering a story the audience can retell, (2) including a vivid visual image to tease out the main ideas of a story so that it sticks with the listeners, and (3) valuing what the audience values.<sup>8</sup>

BTS's storytelling technique embodies these various aspects of creating a relatable and unforgettable narrative. To be more precise, the inclusion of vivid images is a widely shared practice in the K-pop industry, where much energy is directed toward the creation of high-quality music videos and stage performances aided by spectacular choreography, fancy makeup, and fashion statements. Prioritization of vivid images is also symptomatic of the broader digital culture and not a particular practice of BTS, but the band's qualitatively different strength lies in their ability to offer stories the audience can retell while valuing what the audience values.

BTS's famous epithet, "the voice of millennial reality,"<sup>9</sup> indicates the band's empathetic ability to provide audiences with stories. Their voicing of the anxieties of youth living in an uncertain world scarred by depression, suicidal thoughts, and bleak visions of the future while finding beauty, hope, and the courage to love oneself reflects widely shared

sentiments among the younger generation. BTS's critically accepted music video "Spring Day" (2017) is a case in point.

I miss you, miss you even more now that I say it.  
Even as I stare at your photo, I miss you . . .  
Like little dust motes floating in the air  
If I were snow scattered from the sky  
I could reach you sooner . . .  
How much waiting, how many sleepless nights  
Must pass before we meet again?

The lyrics may at first present romantic longing for the other, but "Spring Day" is hardly an ordinary love croon. Its narrative is steeped in grave tragedy, which provides a context for plumbing the depth of its lyrics. As Suk-Young Kim has previously commented,

Many fans and critics have noted that this highly acclaimed music video presented a haunting allegory of the MV *Sewol* disaster on April 16, 2014, when 306 passengers, among them 246 high school students, lost their lives as the ferry sank deep into the ocean off the southwest coast of the Korean Peninsula. Multiple factors caused this calamity, including: careless navigation by the captain and his crew; the company's greed and lack of safety measures that resulted in overloaded cargo; and the lack of immediate rescue response by the government, epitomized by the fact that then South Korean President Park Geun-hye could not be accounted for during more than seven hours after the ferry started to capsize. The catastrophic event – especially in terms of how the older generation failed so many young lives – left deep wounds in the minds of Koreans, painfully haunting the collective psyche to this day.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the majority of BTS fans are of similar age as the students who perished, and the narrative of "Spring Day" is an elegy dedicated to a friend who has crossed the boundary of life and death. BTS represents the pain and loss of the young generation by offering sublimated narratives that will be retold by those whom the group represents. This circular echoing and fusing are at the heart of valuing what the audience values. The documentarian truth of their lyrics and the poetic sublimation of the tragedy anchor the authenticity of BTS.

## **From Idols to Artists**

In a 2012 article on the reasons behind the meteoric rise of K-pop around the globe, journalist Jonathan Seabrook offered one of the most memorable monikers of K-pop idols: "factory girls." Lurking behind the term was the idea that K-pop idols are highly manufactured products quite similar to

factory-made items: artificial and lacking in authenticity. Although manufactured stardom is also a hallmark of the Motown music scene and therefore it is problematic to bracket only Korean pop as manufactured music, Seabrook's judgment is fair to a certain degree, given that the K-pop industry has a substantial track record of suppressing the diverse talents of individual performers as it has evolved around the prioritization of fantastic visual spectacles central to establishing each band's identity.

BTS's success is in large part due to their defiance of such industry standards. The authenticity of the group's music stems primarily from the fact that, since their debut, the members have been deeply involved in songwriting, composing lyrics, arranging, and producing. Self-producing in the pop music industry often serves as a litmus test for the authenticity of artists – a quality not always easy to come by in the K-pop world. Although BTS was made to be idols, due to their self-production, they are perceived differently because they are seen as artists with creative autonomy. Such is the vision cultivated by BTS producer Bang Si-hyuk, who intended to create hip-hop idols – in part due to the mainstream commercial success of hip hop music in the 2010s, but more due to his belief that the hip-hop genre would allow idols to reveal their true selves as artists. Whether Bang's choice was based on commercial or artistic reasons, it proved highly successful. BTS embraced a direct and undecorated storytelling technique, which created the new model of idols as artists.

The hybridity of idol and artist is fully embraced in the 2018 song "IDOL." Rather than coyly alluding to their double identity, they confront it with full-on honesty in the song's lyrics.

You can call me artist (artist)! You can call me idol (idol).  
Whatever you call me, I don't care! I don't care! I'm proud of it (proud of it)!  
I'm free (free)! No more irony (irony)! I was always myself.  
Point fingers at me (yeah yeah yeah yeah), I don't care at all! No matter what  
reason you blame me for! I know what I am (I know what I am)! I know what  
I want (I know what I want)! I never gon' change (I never gon' change)!  
I never gon' trade! (Trade off)

Their self-proclaimed identity as both artist and idol is shared without any sense of sarcasm or irony. BTS in effect is creating a narrative archetype of uninhibited youth who can go on to love and be proud of themselves.

## **BTS on the World Stage**

One defining difference between BTS and most other K-pop groups can be found in where their careers first took off. Unlike other K-pop groups who

became popular in Asia first and then went to Europe and America, BTS first became popular in the United States, which attracted the attention of the Korean audience. As a so-called reverse import to Korea, BTS is unique in that they made it in the US music market, arguably the most challenging to penetrate. From the late 1990s, Korean popular music started to take the world stage under the banner of “K-pop.” The primary target at that time was Japan and East Asia, which shared many cultural similarities with Korea. K-pop overcame the insularity of the Japanese popular music market catering to mostly domestic audiences and became successful through its localization strategy. It remained successful in Japan by either recruiting artists already fluent in Japanese or training artists to be fluent in Japanese as well as casting Japanese members. In this regard, it would be no exaggeration to state that K-pop has become an integral part of Japanese popular culture.

Nonetheless, the barrier to entering the market in the United States and European countries remained high. As the epicenter of contemporary popular music, the mainstream US music market is not an easy place for foreign artists to land. More than anything else, K-pop artists had to rise above their anonymous status. Individual artists were unknown in the United States; moreover, the West did not know that South Korea had a thriving pop music industry. For instance, in the early 2000s in the United States, one had to be a hardcore music aficionado to know of BoA, then the leading female solo artist in the K-pop world. Around 2006 the popularization of YouTube became a significant game changer; nonetheless, K-pop artists were much less known than American indie artists. Rain, who was the leading Asian pop star in the 2000s, was invited by reputable American record companies to have a showcase in the United States, only to be met with harsh criticism that his music was outdated. Wonder Girls, then the top K-pop girl group, was relegated to opening for the Jonas Brothers and toured around the United States under challenging circumstances. But the power dynamics between the K-pop industry and the US music industry was so lopsided that K-pop idols had to be grateful for these opportunities. When their songs occasionally made the Billboard chart, it was a result of a targeted marketing strategy focusing on Korean American and Asian American communities. But the situation gradually started to shift at the end of the 2000s, with SM idols performing at New York’s Madison Square Garden and bands such as Girls’ Generation, Super Junior, BIGBANG, and 2NE1 garnering major success on world stages. This expansive outreach of K-pop culminated in the truly global success of BTS.

The path to the present moment, however, has not been a smooth one. The United States has a more than 200-year history of popular music with



three tracks: (1) Eurocentric music, which constitutes the mainstream; (2) equally influential African American music; and (3) Latinx music. Youngdae Kim noted that “these trends fused throughout history to create the U.S. music culture that has come to dominate the global pop scene.”<sup>11</sup> Even in this melting pot of cultural influences, Asian artists had difficulty entering the mainstream music scene. Asians in the United States in particular were faced with the added challenge of having to confront negative images. While jazz and classical music place much emphasis on performance technique and artistic virtuosity, ethnic music places much emphasis on the authenticity of the ethnically specific experience. Different from these genres, popular music often appeals through the attractiveness – including sexual attractiveness – of the artists. Such tendencies presented particularly challenging conditions for Asian artists, since Asian men were stereotypically projected as asexual by the US media.

The current K-pop industry led by BTS is directly challenging the stereotypical notions surrounding Asian male artists. BTS could be successful in the US market because they defied such Asian male stereotypes and presented themselves as attractive and sophisticated youths, which appealed to the mainstream audience. In this regard, the success of BTS presents a different model than PSY’s breakout song, “Gangnam Style.” While both artists have benefited tremendously from their presence on social media, there is a foundational gulf between the two: PSY’s “Gangnam Style” was a typical viral video made with comical dance at an entertaining cadence that stood as a one-time hit. PSY’s success model bears no resemblance to those of either BTS or other K-pop idols who have been present on the world stage since the 2000s. Neither did it come from K-pop’s training or production system; rather, it had everything to do with his personality and the song’s individual appeal. PSY in a way appealed to a Western audience by reaffirming the preexisting stereotypes about Asians, very similar to how Asian American comedians have operated on the US media circuit. BTS’s approach is different in that they do not rely on any stereotypes or fantasies about Koreans, Asians, or exotic foreigners but operate much the same way that mainstream artists in the West do.

Another way BTS’s success differs from that of PSY or other Asian pop stars is that their power stems from robust fandom rather than virality on social media or systematic promotion in the mainstream music industry. In the past, foreign pop artists’ success was based on their viral hits, as was the case with PSY. In other words, success depended on several songs going viral; therefore, the artists enjoyed only temporary popularity rather than enduring fame supported by their loyal fans. From the early stage of BTS’s career, a small group of extremely loyal fans organized themselves

and led a grassroots movement to shepherd the group to stardom. Once BTS became top artists, their fan base grew exponentially into the most visible and phenomenal fandom in the world of pop music. Historically, global-scale fandom used to exist only for Euro-American pop or rock stars, but BTS is writing history as the first Asian pop stars to command a global audience.

Awards are by no means the only yardstick to measure the success of artists, but they are significant indicators of visibility on the world stage. On May 23, 2021, Billboard Music Awards announced that BTS had been nominated in four categories: top duo/group, social artists, top-selling song, and song sales artists, all of which they eventually won. This was by no means the first time BTS appeared on Billboard's award roster; they had previously won the top social artist (2017–2020) award and top duo/group artist award (2019–2020). Regardless of the results, BTS's high-flying streak as Asian artists at the Billboard Awards carries particular significance. Since the 2000s, K-pop has attempted to become successful in the United States, but for the most part, it has remained a subcultural fascination. BTS's presence in the music award ceremonies marked a turning point: K-pop is now regarded as mainstream in the United States. BTS's proven success is the reason behind major US record labels' willingness to collaborate with Korean companies to produce or distribute K-pop. The fact that BTS released a globally circulated English-language hit song like "Dynamite" and consistently win major music awards is creating a new global cultural phenomenon where Asian artists are reaching unprecedented stature.

The 2021 Billboard Music Awards proved to be special in this regard. Out of five groups nominated in the top social artist category, three were K-pop groups: in addition to BTS, widely popular K-pop girl group BLACKPINK and another popular boyband, Seventeen, made the list. Also noteworthy is the Filipino boyband SB19. What does it mean to have so many Asian nominees for mainstream awards like the Billboard Music Awards? How much weight does the top social artist award carry when it is based on online voting and given to the group whose fans have the largest social media presence? These are questions that do not yield simple answers, but obviously the system of judging popularity is changing. In the past, the popularity of artists was generally measured by album sales and the frequency of TV and radio appearances, making high-selling music and frequently visible artists popular. But nowadays, "music enjoyed by everyone" no longer carries the same weight; significant changes in popularity came with changes in the way music is shared and how the fandom coheres around their shared agenda. Popular music no longer is propagated via traditional media such as radio or broadcast TV networks.

Listeners now use streaming services to access the music of their favorite artists and tend to listen to their favorites repeatedly – a trend that prioritizes interpersonal social media communication more than broadcasting systems. Social media platforms are where users reveal their personal tastes and share their interests with like-minded people. Social media also serve as a forum to freely express fandom affiliations. It is a place for high-frequency users with intense emotional involvement, “serving as the space to showcase the popularity of artists in the most primal sense.”<sup>12</sup>

Popularity in the age of social media networks differs significantly from conventional notions. The social index is not just a casual sign of fleeting curiosity; more likely, it is a reflection of conscious fan engagement in an attempt to promote their favorite artists. While the vast majority of listeners stream their favorite songs several times at most, hardcore fans actively engage in promoting their favorite artists’ songs via hashtag bombardments. One might have difficulties accepting the buzz created by such activities, akin to a political campaign, as genuine popularity, and it is still debatable which makes a broader statement about the artist’s popularity: a large number of silent and passive fans or a smaller number of hyperactive and visible fans.

To be clear, the top social artist award was not created in anticipation of K-pop’s rise and global prominence. Rather, it was established in 2011 to reflect the rapidly changing patterns of pop music consumption. Since its inception, pop idol Justin Bieber won the top social artist award for six consecutive years, but in 2017, the winning streak came to a halt when BTS won. The year 2021 marked the fourth consecutive year BTS was chosen. As a group with a hyperactive fandom on social media, BTS is changing the concept of popularity against the backdrop of the rapidly shifting media landscape.

In contrast to Billboard’s top social artist award, which reflects the latest popular trend, BTS’s Grammy nomination in 2021 registers the band’s significance in a different manner. In this regard, BTS marks a new chapter in Grammy history with their presence in the popular music category – a category that is not defined by a particular music genre but rather signals “the nominees’ popularity and recognizability in the popular music arena.”<sup>13</sup>

This was the first time Asian pop artists had been nominated in the category. Before BTS’s nomination, Asian nominees or winners of the Grammy had been either classical musicians or technical engineers. Therefore, BTS’s entry marked a tidal shift in not only the K-pop/Asian pop industry but also US popular culture. Having worked outside the US music industry and reached the height of global prominence on their own, BTS is enjoying success not simply as an individual band but as a symbol

that started to create cracks in the existing order in the US-centric music business. Despite the announcement in June 2022 that the group's activities will be temporarily halted, BTS will continue to cast a long shadow in the times to come.

### **A Shift in the K-Pop Music Industry**

The year 2021 saw a paradigm shift in the globalization of the K-pop industry. As if it had been previously agreed upon, the top three representatives of K-pop companies announced projects that appeared different on the surface but in essence shared much in common. In February, HYBE Corporation (formerly Big Hit Entertainment) announced that it would create a joint label and groom new K-pop groups based in North America in collaboration with Geffen Records, a subsidiary of the largest record label, Universal Music Group. According to Carolina Malis, a K-pop journalist, "Both Big Hit and Universal have something to add to the mix, and it makes sense that they're partnering up for this new challenge instead of trying to make it happen separately." Malis added that Big Hit had expertise in artist development and engaging fans, while Geffen and UMG could take care of marketing, production, and distribution.<sup>14</sup>

It is likely that this joint label will follow the time-honored idol recruiting system: hosting a reality audition show to discover future stars, who will be produced and promoted by the joint label. Although there has been a case in the past where SM Entertainment collaborated with Capitol Records to launch SuperM, an all-star boy band comprising the shiniest stars of SM Entertainment, the HYBE-UMG joint venture presents a unique opportunity for the K-pop industry in that a major US label will entrust a Korean partner with total control over producing a new K-pop group for the US audience.

Three months after the announcement, CJ ENM and SM Entertainment announced similar plans. CJ ENM will collaborate with HBO Max to produce a Latin American K-pop band, while SM Entertainment will work with MGM Television to audition members for NCT Hollywood, a North American unit of the group NCT. All three projects share a common objective of creating a "localized" group based in North America. Although such developments would have been simply unimaginable just a few years ago, localization projects are nothing new to the K-pop industry. Since K-pop's early attempts at globalization, producers' ultimate aim was to make it in the West, especially in the United States. But only a few believed that it would be realistic to set such a goal. Many believed that the success of K-pop would be restricted to Asia

due to linguistic and cultural differences between Korea and other countries outside the region. Current developments in the music industry belie such a prognosis, since not only is the K-pop industry striving to reach a broader global audience, but also Euro-American music markets are actively courting K-pop acts.

To date, efforts to globalize K-pop have evolved in the following steps. Often known as “cultural technology,” the conventional production and marketing strategy developed sequentially around (1) Korean musicians’ debut in the foreign music market after mastering foreign languages and customs, (2) the formation of global groups by incorporating foreign or overseas Korean members, and (3) establishing a joint venture with foreign companies or debuting a group consisting entirely of foreign members in a foreign market. The previous two stages garnered a degree of success, but they were also faced with risks and limitations. For this reason, only the third stage was regarded as the solid model to realize the K-pop industry’s ultimate dream.

The third stage has already had its trial in Japan and China, respectively, with JYP Entertainment’s Japan-based group Nizhu and SM Entertainment’s China-based WayV. The big question is whether this model will work in North and South America. Time will tell, but the present industry consensus points to an optimistic outlook that now is the right time to launch such projects. The fact that three similar projects were announced almost simultaneously by HYBE, CJ ENM, and SM Entertainment proves the point.

BTS’s success must be one of the reasons for the optimistic attitude. Especially for producers with financial means, BTS’s surpassing of native artists must have been a motivator to invest in fostering new groups. It is noteworthy that the US music industry started to pay attention to the commercial potential of the Korean-style system of producing idols; for instance, the audition reality show that CJ ENM and HBO Max prepared was but another rendition of *Produce 101*, the most popular idol audition show that CJ ENM previously produced. The NCT Hollywood project by SM Entertainment would not have been realized had it not been for their American partner’s trust in SM’s “culture technology” – a term coined by SM’s chief producer in reference to the systematic recruitment, training, and promotion of idols.

As many cultural critics note, the future of the music industry depends on how successfully it can build fandom. In this regard, K-pop has an unparalleled culture of catering to fans. When it comes to communicating with fandom and understanding the fans’ desire, it has long surpassed the teen pop industry in the United States. Korea has dominated the teen pop

genre – mainly idol music geared to young fans – across the globe by the sheer visibility of their fandom in social media spaces, providing an incentive for US labels to forge partnerships with K-pop companies.

Another notable event of 2021 was the news that HYBE Corporation planned to merge with Ithaca Holdings. Ithaca Holdings was founded by Scooter Braun, who, with subsidiary artist management companies such as SB Project, discovered and produced teen idols such as Justin Bieber and secured contracts with top stars such as Ariana Grande. The fact that Braun sold his shares to HYBE is an indication of how this major player in the US pop industry intended to become a player in the future of K-pop. The merger signaled HYBE's ambition to go beyond the status of K-pop entertainment company and transform itself into a multi-entertainment company on a global stage.

K-pop today is perceived as the only viable music industry to measure up to the dominance of the Euro-American pop music industry, but there remains something unique about the path BTS has taken thus far. BTS is larger than the K-pop industry itself, and without their phenomenal success and visibility, major media outlets in the United States would not have launched collaborative projects with K-pop bands. From the US perspective, rather than approaching K-pop in abstract terms, it is much more attractive to create a “post-BTS” phenomenon.

## **Into the Storm: Racial Prejudice, Racial Solidarity**

With the K-pop industry's global reach, the world in which K-pop idols dwell has and will continue to become ever more multiracial and diverse in cultural sensibilities. Both bright and dark moments of K-pop will inevitably become more visible with the genre's growing global presence.

In February 2021, Bayern 3 Radio host Matthias Matuschik's racialized remarks on BTS proved the point. Early in 2021, BTS covered the British rock band Coldplay's hit song “Fix You” for *MTV Unplugged*. This performance ignited a vitriolic response from the German host of Bayern 3 Radio, who used “blasphemy” to express his discontent with the performance. Comparing BTS to a virus, Matuschik invoked North Korea as well as South Korea–manufactured cars out of context, exposing a long-standing prejudice Westerners hold against Asians. Only when confronted with a protest by the BTS fanclub ARMY from all over the world, including ARMY members based in Germany, did the station make an apology and set out to alleviate the situation. But the incident exposed a deep-seated prejudice against Asian performers.

To be sure, racial insults against BTS take a slightly different tone compared to, say, widespread racism against Blacks in the United States or widespread antiforeign sentiment in the West. The Bayern 3 Radio host's remarks were more akin to the sentiment against the shifting order in popular culture. More precisely, they came as a snappy response to the rising influence of what is considered a threat to the preexisting order in the music industry. Underlying such a sentiment are the belief in rock superiority, pop imperialism, and derision of Asian popular music. This is by no means an isolated case. Ever since BTS claimed the top band position on global charts and in awards, innate conflict percolating for a long time below the surface has been erupting in full force.

The German radio host could not stomach the fact that, as he saw it, rock authenticity was being tarnished by BTS, an Asian boy band hailing from the margins of the music industry. In the minds of this host and many others in the Western audience, these Asian pop stars thrive on saccharine melodies and childish tunes, to the adulation of girl fans who are hardly music connoisseurs. Rock music represents artistic authenticity, intellectual force, and machismo, which prioritizes agency of artists over popularity of idols. It must have been difficult to accept that *MTV Unplugged*, where rock legends such as Eric Clapton and Nirvana performed, gave its stage to a Korean boy band. The case with the German radio host is just one realization of such sentiments, which still saturate the industry, ready to resurface at any moment.

It is highly possible that BTS as well as K-pop at large will enter the pages of history as a curious cultural phenomenon of social media-obsessed Gen Z or Gen Alpha. But BTS is breaking the conventions of the pop imperialism that thrived under the notions of cosmopolitanism or modernity. What makes the group a formidable counterforce to the previous order is their engaged fandom, ARMY, which is making inroads into political activism, voicing their concerns about racism, gender equality, and advocacy for youth. The most striking incident to date came during the 2020 presidential campaign, when K-pop fans, many of whom were members of ARMY, sabotaged Donald Trump's political rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma. They deployed their social media skills to reserve a large number of tickets to the rally with no intention of participating, leaving gaping holes in the seating area to ruin Trump's photo op.

Following the eruption of racist violence with the murder of George Floyd and other people of color, the online and offline activism involving #BlackLivesMatter in 2020 was ripe with a broader stream of people willing to participate in the movement against long-standing racial violence in the United States. K-pop fans, as seen in the Tulsa rally, were one such group, as analyzed by Suk-Young Kim:



K-pop's strong hip hop basis appeals to racially diverse music fans, and K-pop performers' seemingly gender-fluid looks attract the attention of the LGBTQ+ community. The majority of K-pop fandom in the U.S. are women and people of color, who are more likely to stay attuned to significant social shifts such as BlackLivesMatter and the MeToo movement. It is no wonder they have earned monikers such as "online vigilantes" or "digital warriors" who use their tech savviness to act upon outrageous political events in a time of lockdown.<sup>15</sup>

The online presence of K-pop fans, most prominently illustrated by ARMY, is creating a substantial voice in social activism, presenting themselves as a force to be reckoned with. Pop stars of today are more influential social organizers than simple entertainers, and an Asian group such as BTS has become a rallying point where traditionally marginalized people can voice their concerns in the world. This, too, is a crucial aspect of BTS's authenticity.

## Notes

- 1 Eliza Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 179.
- 2 Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), 53.
- 3 Jann S. Wenner, "John Lennon Remembers, Part One," *Rolling Stone.com*, January 21, 1971, [www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/lennon-remembers-part-one-186693/](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/lennon-remembers-part-one-186693/).
- 4 Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll*, 236.
- 5 Chris Gibson and John Connell, *Soundtracks: Popular Music, Identity, and Place* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 122.
- 6 "Anabada" is a neologism from the late 1990s that refers to the post-IMF sentiment in South Korea to live frugally and economize on everything. *Anabada* is an abbreviation of four verbs: *a* from the verb *akkida* (to economize); *na* from the verb *nanwo sseuda* (to share); *ba* from the verb *bakkwo-sseuda* (to exchange); *da* from the verb *dashi-sseuda* (to reuse).
- 7 Gibson and Connell, *Soundtracks*, 54.
- 8 Robert J. Shiller, *Narrative Economics: How Stories Go Viral and Drive Major Economic Events* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), part I.
- 9 Tamar Herman, "A Guide to BTS, and 7 Other Korean Boy Bands Making Waves in the U.S.," *Vulture.com*, November 13, 2017, [www.vulture.com/2017/11/your-guide-to-the-latest-wave-of-k-pop-boy-bands.html](http://www.vulture.com/2017/11/your-guide-to-the-latest-wave-of-k-pop-boy-bands.html).
- 10 Suk-Young Kim, "Beauty and the Waste: Fashioning Idols and the Ethics of Recycling in Korean Pop Music Videos," *Fashion Theory* (March 2019): 11.
- 11 Youngdae Kim, *Idols as Artists in the K-Pop Era* (Seoul: Munhak Dongnae, 2021), 256.
- 12 Kim, *Idols as Artists in the K-Pop Era*, 266.
- 13 Kim, *Idols as Artists in the K-Pop Era*, 258.
- 14 "BTS Label Big Hit and Universal Seek Next Boy Band," *BBC News*, February 18, 2021, [www.bbc.com/news/business-56107527](http://www.bbc.com/news/business-56107527).
- 15 Suk-Young Kim, "K-Pop Stans' Anti-Trump, Black Lives Matter Activism Reveals Their Progressive Evolution," *NBC Think*, June 28, 2020, [www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/k-pop-stans-anti-trump-black-lives-matter-activism-reveals-ncna1232327/](http://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/k-pop-stans-anti-trump-black-lives-matter-activism-reveals-ncna1232327/).