

The Rise of K-pop Boyband BTS in the U.S.:
Race, Identity, and Shifting Paradigms

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Abstract

This paper considers South Korean K-pop boyband BTS and their notable successes in the United States in recent years as a part of the continuing transnational cultural phenomenon known as the Korean Wave which first began its surge across the globe in the 1990s. Recently, BTS has been making huge splashes on the U.S. popular music scene with regular appearances on U.S. television shows, selling out concert arenas, topping the Billboard charts, and winning numerous prestigious American music awards. Additionally, the group has accomplished several historical feats such as becoming the first South Korean group to perform at the Grammys. Despite these impressive developments the Korean Wave and BTS are two phenomena about which the general U.S. population seems to know relatively little. While most Americans are likely to have heard of the Academy Award-winning, Korean-produced film, *Parasite*, are probably familiar with or have watched the Korean Netflix series *Squid Game* and might have even caught glimpses of BTS performances in the media, the greater picture of the Korean Wave and its incredible socio-cultural significance seems to be vastly unknown to a large portion of the population outside of academia, Korean culture, or “K-culture” fandom. This paper seeks to address this lack of familiarity while examining possible causes leading to the fascinating and in many instances unprecedented level of success by a primarily non-English-speaking, non-Western band in a music industry that has long been dominated by Anglo-Western artists. The possible reasons for BTS’s rise in the U.S. popular music scene lead to important considerations about changing perspectives of 21st century Americans within the context of an increasingly digital and globalized world. This paper demonstrates how the success of BTS provides evidence for an American society that is becoming more culturally inclusive, potentially paving the way for a paradigm shift toward a more diverse music industry that has long been dominated by the Anglocentric West.

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Introduction

In the summer of 2014, having just completed my undergraduate studies and being eager to travel, I began searching for employment opportunities teaching English overseas. This is how I ended up spending five years living in South Korea, which provided competitive working benefits for foreign English teachers and promised to be a welcoming environment for Westerners such as myself who were new to the expat life. Before living in South Korea, I had known little about the country's culture and could not have anticipated the level of appreciation I would gain for this small yet fascinating place and its people and customs.

It was shortly after my arrival in South Korea that I first heard of K-pop – or Korean popular music. It was all many of my students seemed to talk about. Given both my curiosity and desire to better relate to my students, I decided to conduct a YouTube investigation, where I received my first formal introduction to the genre. One of the most popular K-pop groups at the time was called Exo. Two things initially stood out to me about the group. First was their appearance: nine tall and thin young men in sharply coordinated outfits appearing to be somewhere between the ages of 18–24. The second thing I was mesmerized by was the highly coordinated dance choreography that accompanied the group's vocals. It was also interesting to notice that the singing was mostly in Korean but had a few English phrases sprinkled in as well. Aside from this fascinating use of lingual hybridity the Exo performances I surveyed seemed to encompass all the same elements one might expect to find in a Western pop genre of 2014, with catchy musical hooks, a driving beat, and dazzling artists. Watching Exo's performance was reminiscent of a highly polished and elevated rendition of an NSYNC routine, but with a harder-edged hip-hop influence. My YouTube introduction to K-pop and its at first surprising similarities to Western pop, I would later realize, was only an introduction for the extent to which Western music had been influencing the culture of South Korea over the past several decades.

As my time in South Korea went on I would come to realize that Western influence extended far beyond South Korea's music. In the Korean language there were many English cognates, and *everyone* seemed to prize the ability to speak English. Western consumer products from Starbucks to Disney were

everywhere, and fusion Korean–Western restaurants abounded. For someone who had been largely unfamiliar with the historical relationship between South Korea and the U.S. as well as South Korean culture in general, seeing such a clear Western influence laid prevalent in the streets of South Korea had come rather unexpected for me.

It wasn't really until 2019 — five years later, upon returning to the United States — that I became aware of the transnational cultural phenomenon known as the Korean Wave. In South Korea, I had heard mention of the “K–wave” or “Hallyu” (as it is also sometimes called) but had not fully understood at that time the significance of its development or how widespread it was. In her book on the subject, Youna Kim refers to the initial 1990s emergence of the Korean Wave as “the first instance of a major global circulation of Korean popular culture in history.”¹ Perhaps I only became aware of this hugely significant cultural development upon my return to the States because of my now deep–rooted connection to the country (as someone who had spent a significant amount of time living there) as well as my ability to recognize a Korean product when I saw one. I soon noticed that there were Korean cosmetics on the shelves at Ulta and Sephora and that much of the trending clothing fashions, especially of younger generations, looked somehow more “Korean” to me. I couldn't be sure whether the fashion trends I was observing had first come from South Korea or if they had migrated from West to East.

Beyond the seemingly new prevalence of Korean products and fashion in my home country, I was further surprised to find that several of my friends and family members had taken up an interest in South Korean culture. My friend's mother (who, to my knowledge, had had no previous connection or interest in Korean culture) was now binge–watching Korean Dramas (K–dramas). Also surprising was my discovery that my sister–in–law had recently become obsessed with the relatively new K–pop band, BTS.² Furthermore, many of the family and friends I conversed with in the weeks following my return to

1. Youna Kim, *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*, 2013.

2. BTS's name is an acronym that has taken on multiple variations from Bangtan Sonyeondan, Bangtan Boys, Bulletproof Boy Scouts, and Beyond the Scene.

the U.S. consistently commented that, to them, South Korea looked “very cool” and was a place they had an interest in visiting.

What was so puzzling to me about all of this was the simple fact that none of the interest in South Korean culture I was now encountering had seemed to exist in my circle of acquaintances prior to my having lived in South Korea. While it would not be entirely unsensible to surmise that the interest in South Korean culture had been there all along, but that I had simply not been aware of it, or that those in my close circle of acquaintances had taken up an interest in South Korean culture because they now knew someone who lived there (that someone being me), this would not explain the broader appeal of South Korean culture that I was observing in stores and current fashion trends, and in many other realms of the public sphere as well.

In 2022, signs of the growing strength of the Korean Wave in the U.S. abound. Bong Joon–Ho’s film, *Parasite*, won four Academy awards in February of 2020, becoming the first South Korean film to win an Academy Award and the first non–English film to win Best Picture at the prestigious event. Furthermore, in November 2021, the South Korean TV series *Squid Game* became the most viewed Netflix program of all time.³ And over the past three–plus years, K–pop boyband BTS has been making regular appearances on U.S. television shows, selling out concert arenas, topping billboard charts, and winning numerous prestigious American music awards. Yet, even with this level of success and visibility of South Korean cultural exports within the U.S. public sphere, the Korean Wave and BTS are two phenomena that are consistently unknown to those I have interacted with personally. I have found that while many of these people (my American friends and acquaintances) have typically heard of *Parasite* and *Squid Game* and might have even heard or seen BTS in the media, they seem to be largely unfamiliar with the overarching concept of the Korean Wave and its significance. How and why might this be? More broadly speaking, what does the observable spike in popularity of South Korean cultural exports in

³ Patrick Hipes, “‘Squid Game’ Still No. 1 On U.S. Streaming Charts; ‘You’, ‘Shameless’ Strong in Debuts,” *Deadline Sound and Screen*, November 10, 2021, <https://deadline.com/2021/11/squid-game-streaming-ratings-october-11-21-you-shameless-netflix-1234871703/>.

the U.S., especially over the past five years, along with the paradoxical seeming lack of awareness for the general U.S. population of these significant developments reveal about whether potential shifting paradigms of longstanding Western dominance could be afoot, as some researchers have suggested? These are some of the questions that have driven me to explore the Korean Wave and specifically, the “BTS phenomenon” more deeply: an exploration which has uncovered some important implications useful for an understanding of issues such as race and cultural inclusivity within the U.S. at this particular point in history.

Youna Kim writes in her introduction to *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*, “Since the late 1990s South Korea has emerged as a new center for the production of transnational popular culture – the first instance of a major global circulation of Korean popular culture in history. Why popular (or not)? Why now? What does it mean socially, culturally, and politically in a global context?”⁴ In 2022, the Korean Wave, or phenomenal spread of Korean popular culture, to which Kim is referring, is still going strong. Additionally, the questions she was asking in 2013 remain relevant just as much today – if not more so – than they did then. I say *more so* primarily for three reasons: First, because two decades is an impressive lifespan for a global trend of this nature making it especially worthy of study; second, because the trend is not only still ongoing but seemingly growing stronger – and in an industry that has been historically Western-dominated, posing the question of why; and third, because in a rapidly changing world there is always something new to uncover even in the span of two years, much less eight – or twenty. There are important observations to be made from regularly following the trends of the Korean Wave as they develop, and few studies have been done that closely consider the recent and significant developments in the U.S. in the past five years.

In my research, I take Kim’s questions and apply them to the case of BTS’s success in the U.S. asking: what does it mean that BTS, a non-Western, primarily non-English speaking boyband from South Korea was awarded Artist of the Year at the 2021 American Music Awards? Or that they beat out

4. Kim, 3.

superstars such as Arianna Grande, Justin Bieber, Shawn Mendez, and Selena Gomez for Top Social Artist at the 2017 Billboard Awards? That they are consistently topping global music charts in achievements unprecedented from other Asian musical groups? That they had record-breaking North American ticket sales in 2020, selling out venues like SoFi Stadium in California during the presale phase? And that they made two appearances at the U.N. General Assembly, including giving a performance and special speech at their 2021 appearance, drawing nearly a million viewers? These are just a few of the enormous successes BTS has had in the U.S. (or global limelight) in recent years. Why now? And what does it mean in the context of U.S. culture?

In aiming to answer the above questions, my research has developed into four parts which are all critical and interconnected aspects of the inquiry. This paper will provide an explanation along with important cultural implications for the seemingly sudden and explosive rise of the K-pop boyband BTS in the U.S. in four interdependent parts: first, by tracing the rise of BTS as a continuing part of the Korean Wave; second, by demonstrating the authenticity of BTS and their music as an impactful cultural entity; third by analyzing and uncovering the cultural properties exemplified in BTS's track, "IDOL"; and last by providing evidence that BTS fans are not a monolith but a diverse group of people who are, together with BTS, paving the way for cultural diversity both in the U.S. and in the mainstream popular music industry.

I. UNRAVELING THE POPULARITY OF BTS IN THE U.S.

BTS as an Important Part of Korean Wave Discourse and Implications for the U.S.

As I mentioned in the introduction above, the Korean Wave is a transcultural phenomenon that emerged in the early 1990s which a surprising portion of the general Western population seems to know little about unless individuals have ties to South Korea or have some other reason to be interested in the country's culture. Such interests might be due to ethnic heritage, pre-existing cultural intrigue (Korean popular music or Korean drama fans for example), academic research, or some other connection. I am, admittedly, generalizing, since without a comprehensive survey of the entire Western population, it is impossible to determine exactly how much is generally known on the topic. I base my suspicions that

relatively little is known about the Korean Wave primarily on what I have learned through many personal conversations with friends, colleagues, and a handful of social media surveys I have conducted (which entails only a small percentage of the general Western population). For clarification, with terms like “Western population,” what is meant for the purposes of this paper is specifically in relation to the U.S. non-Korean, non-Asian population. My reason for this distinction is that it is much more likely that a South Korean American or even other Americans of Asian descent would be aware of the Korean Wave since it is closely connected to their national and cultural heritage. Despite a lack of clear empirical data on the matter there seems to be a knowledge deficit in relation to the Korean Wave at least on some level among non-Asian Americans, Korean culture or “K-culture” aficionados excluded. Once again, the fact that such a relatively small faction of Westerners seem to be aware of the Korean Wave despite its significant social, cultural, and political implications is precisely why further investigation is important.

Although much has been written on the Korean Wave, my research is unique because it focuses on events surrounding the Korean Wave as they relate specifically to the United States rather than on the global scale. It also focuses specifically on Korean Popular (K-pop) reception in the U.S. as a specific part of the Korean Wave discourse. Much has also been written on the topic of K-pop itself; however, few studies have focused on a singular musical group, instead focusing on K-pop more generally while exploring issues such as issues of genre definition, authenticity and identity, soft power, hybridization, globalization, etc. My research synthesizes many of these previously explored concepts and applies them specifically to the phenomenal success of the boyband BTS in the U.S. over the course of the past five years while at times supporting the conclusions other researchers have made and at other times as challenging them.

Is all of this significant? As mentioned above, the Korean Wave has many important social, cultural, and political implications which can be unpacked from endless directions. My primary purpose is to show what those implications are for Westerners, specifically Americans, whom, at this particular and turbulent time in history, have been grappling with issues of racism and cultural inequality permeating nearly every aspect of society (including the music industry) while simultaneously trying to survive a

worldwide pandemic that has been extremely socially and politically charged. Amidst this chaotic backdrop, it is fascinating to consider that BTS, a primarily non-English-speaking boyband from South Korea, has risen to the top of American music charts, signaling a cultural contraflow and potentially providing evidence for an increasingly inclusive music industry with a more cosmopolitan-minded audience than has historically been the case.

While the popularity of BTS is clearly building in the U.S., pinpointing the demographics of its fan base (widely known as A.R.M.Y.) is complicated as the majority of demographic studies which have been conducted have focused on measuring BTS's worldwide fan base rather than studying it at the localized level.⁵ However, the data from these global demographic studies provides a helpful starting place to understanding the demographics of BTS's fan base in the U.S.

To begin, available data shows that the collective of BTS fans across the globe is, indeed, enormous.⁶ And it is clear that what began as a localized following of South Korean fans has expanded to include a diverse audience of varying genders, ages, and nationalities. The most immediate evidence for this is found in social media posts and YouTube video comments where fans write in multiple languages. Contrary to what many might assume to be the case for a boyband, a number of fans are older than might be expected, including Ava McCurley, who writes in a reaction to a YouTube documentary of BTS, "I am 70 years old and I love BTS. Their music takes me through all the emotions and makes me very happy. Love it all."⁷ While it may not be shocking to find that there are always exceptions when considering the general demographics of certain groups such as BTS fans, stereotyping can lead to false assumptions as well as harmful stigmas. Stereotyping of fans has been an issue surrounding BTS as it is believed to be

5. A.R.M.Y., the name for BTS's fan base, stands for Adorable Representative Me's for Youth.

6. Marian Liu, Youjin Shin, and Shelly Tan, "How K-pop Conquered the Universe," Washington Post, July 14, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/entertainment/how-k-pop-conquered-the-universe/2021/07/15/e364279c-3604-4af6-9822-f73e4dde49c7_video.html.

7. Ava McCurley, "The Most Beautiful Life Goes On: A Story of BTS (2021 Update!)," YouTube comment, October 2021, https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=48Tc_Y2U0Tg.

partially responsible for the band not always being taken seriously by both general music audiences as well as higher-profile figures that often hold a lot of influence. An often-cited example is the backlash received by British celebrity show host James Corbin over an off-handed comment about BTS's fans where he made the over-generalized characterization that the fans consisted of "a bunch of 15-year-old girls."⁸ Corbin, who has since become friends with BTS and hosted them on his show a number of times, later apologized profusely for the comment. While insensitive, Corbin's remark was not entirely off-base, however.

A sociological survey of over 400,000 BTS fans conducted in July of 2020 revealed that the largest group of BTS fans were from Indonesia (20%), followed by Mexico (10.6%), the United States (8.4%), Peru (5.12%), and the Philippines (4.5%) with the smallest group hailing from South Korea (3.7%). Additionally, the majority of the fans were female and under the age of twenty-nine.⁹ This data aligned with information provided by Soundcharts, an online music tracking database, seen in Figure 1.¹⁰

8. South China Morning Post, "What's the beef with James Corden and BTS' A.R.M.Y.?" September 21, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/celebrity/article/3149900/whats-beef-james-corden-and-bts-A.R.M.Y.-late-late-show-host>.

9. David A. Tizzard, "Who likes BTS? A survey of 400,000 fans around the world!" *Korean Times*, March 27, 2021, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/05/782_306147.html.

10. Soundcharts, accessed March 2022. This Soundcharts data is based on a synthesis of 8 of the most popular social media and streaming platforms including: Deezer, Facebook, Instagram, Line, Spotify, Tiktok, Twitter, and YouTube.

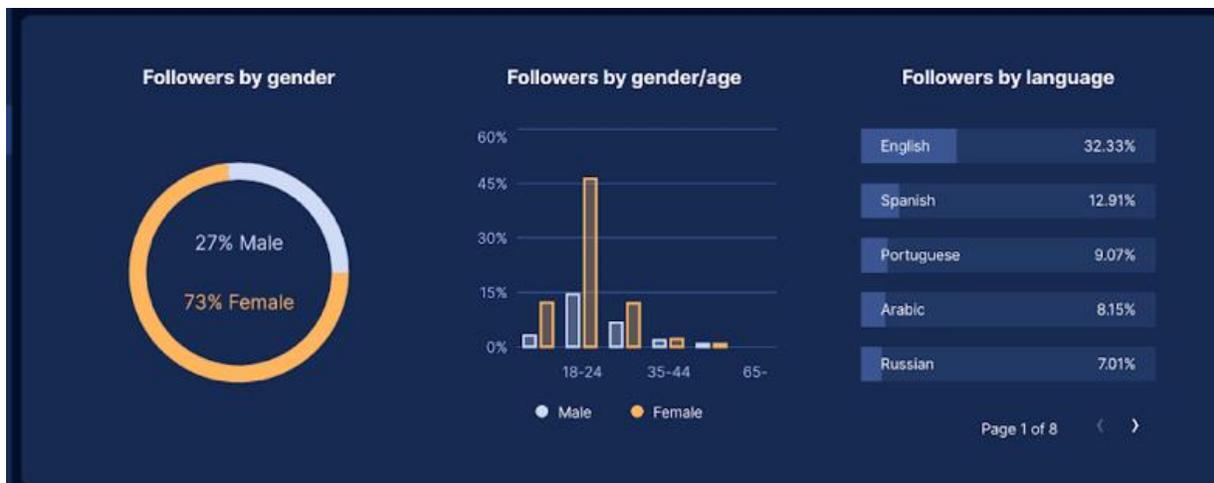


Figure 1: Soundcharts demographic data of BTS fans by gender, age, and language.

Aside from age and gender demographics, perhaps the most interesting revelation was the indication that a greater number of BTS fans reside outside of South Korea than within it. This fact illuminates the emphasis Korea has placed on cultural export in recent years and demonstrates not only a significant achievement economically, but also a widespread dissemination of Korean culture or presence transnationally, including in the U.S. In fact, according to data also synthesized by Soundcharts, the U.S. has the highest viewership of BTS content after India, and these numbers are on the rise. This is seen in Figure 2.¹¹



Figure 2: Soundcharts data depicting the popularity of BTS among various countries based on viewership.

11. Soundcharts, Accessed March 2022.

While the above data provides clues about the global demographic of BTS fans, further study is needed to understand the demographic of fans specific to the U.S. In the final section of this paper, I discuss my findings that have resulted from an initial virtual ethnographic investigation of the demographics of BTS's fan base in the U.S. The driving challenge of this ethnographic research is an effort to uncover BTS's true popularity (or lack of popularity) among different groups of Americans (Asian American, Black American, Caucasian American, etc.) and to better understand the meaning of this in relationship to cultural issues surrounding ethnocentricity and inclusion in the U.S. This requires an understanding of how much a virtual fan base (which could be geographically located anywhere) has played a part in boosting BTS to the top of American charts and winning them awards like "Top Social Artist," potentially creating a false sense of popularity among Americans or at least a popularity among Western music industry leaders. A circumstance that provides some context for this dilemma may be found in the controversy over BTS's history with the Grammy Awards ceremonies since their first appearance in 2019.

***BTS as Grammy Performers and Their Relationship with the Recording Academy,
"The Traditional Gatekeepers of the Western Music Industry"***

Winning a Grammy has been a primary goal for BTS over the past few years; an achievement that would make them the first South Korean group and first of any Asian group ever to do so. To date, BTS has made four Grammy appearances but their failure to actually win an award after two consecutive years as nominees and despite overwhelming fan support and chart-topping successes has led to discussion around race and inclusion climaxing with some passionate fans and critics even charging the Recording Academy with xenophobia. A historical understanding of BTS's relationship to the Grammys is necessary to further understand these concerns.

BTS's relationship with the Grammy's began in 2019 at the 61st awards ceremony when BTS's album, *Love Yourself: Tear*, was nominated for Best Recording Package (an award presented for the visual look of an album). While the band and its fans were elated to receive such recognition, A.R.M.Y.

were surprised that BTS did not receive nominations in more categories and for their music itself.

However, they remained hopeful that BTS would achieve their dream in the following year.

BTS was, indeed, invited back to the 62nd Grammys in 2020 as performers in collaboration with the genre defying country rapper Lil Nas. Being invited to perform at the Grammys was not only a huge honor for BTS but felt like one step closer to the attainment of their dream of winning a Grammy. A.R.M.Y.s were also excited to see their K-pop idols performing on the Grammy stage but eagerly awaited the moment they would see their stars be fully recognized for their talents at the prestigious American awards show.

That moment felt very real at the 63rd Grammys in 2021 when BTS finally received their first music nomination for a Grammy award. This was for their No.1 chart-topping track, “Dynamite.” It is notable that “Dynamite” was BTS’s first full-length English track and also interesting to consider how much the choice to release a song in English rather than the band’s native tongue (considered a “sell out” by some) likely affected the song’s popularity with the American audience, ultimately landing it on the Recording Academy’s radar for Grammy nomination. In the end, BTS did not win the award which was given to Lady Gaga and Ariana Grande for their track, “Rain on Me.” Despite the great disappointment over not winning the award, the band remained hopeful that they would win an award in the near future. Many A.R.M.Y.s on the other hand expressed outrage on social media over the fact that BTS had yet again been failed to be recognized by the Grammys despite the band having achieved a number of record-breaking successes that were both culturally and musically significant.¹² Some fans could not help but feel that BTS was being discriminated against and not taken seriously by the small and anonymous voting members of the Recording Academy who ultimately decided the award recipients. Was BTS, notorious for boosting viewership through their millions of fans who faithfully showed up for the band at performances and pretty much every public appearance, being exploited and reduced to the purposes of

12. Starr Bowenbank, “Every Time BTS Has Set a Guinness World Record,” December 14, 2021, <https://www.billboard.com/music/pop/every-bts-guinness-world-record-1235010255/>.

tokenism as at least one writer from *Forbes* seemed to imply?¹³ While BTS has consistently won awards whenever fan votes are taken into consideration (for example, the “Top Social Artist” award given at the AMAs) regularly beating out Western pop stars like Justin Bieber and Ariana Grande¹⁴, the group has thus far been unable to attain a Grammy: an award which does not consider fan votes and is awarded by a select group of industry professionals. Could BTS’ failure to be awarded a Grammy potentially be a sign that growth toward cultural inclusivity in the U.S. is still at this point more of an allusion than anything else?

The Recording Academy and its Grammys Awards have faced allegations of corruption and discrimination in recent years and have been called out for discrimination by artists such as The Weeknd and Halsey,¹⁵ as well as from music critics and reporters such as Bryan Rolli of *Forbes*.¹⁶ In response to such allegations, the Recording Academy has been revising its system to become more inclusive and transparent. Also in what is an assumed effort to improve on areas that have caused backlash the Recording Academy is adding two new categories of awards for future ceremonies that include Best Global Music Performance and Best Latin Urban Music Album. However, the addition of new award categories has only raised more issues among critics who want artist to be equally considered alongside all musicians in their relevant categories rather than relegated to individual categories with titles that include terms like “global music.” The fact that BTS has repeatedly won awards that take fans into

13. Bryan Rolli, “The Grammys Once Again Did the Bare Minimum For BTS,” March 15, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrolli/2021/03/15/the-grammys-once-again-did-the-bare-minimum-for-bts/?sh=3d590f986129>.

14. Marian Liu, “Bigger than Bieber? K-pop group BTS beats US stars to win Billboard Music Award,” May 22, 2017, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/entertainment/2017/05/22/Kpop-BTS-Billboard-Music-Award.html>.

15. Reuters, “Grammy organizers change rules after allegations of corruption,” April 30, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/grammy-organizers-change-rules-after-allegations-corruption-2021-04-30/>.

16. Bryan Rolli, “The Grammys Once Again Did The Bare Minimum For BTS,” March 15, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrolli/2021/03/15/the-grammys-once-again-did-the-bare-minimum-for-bts/?sh=b09804f6129f>.

account and yet still do not seem to fully be taken seriously by the Grammys and its Recording Academy may indicate that the U.S. still has plenty of room to grow in the area of inclusivity.

Cultural inequality and inclusivity are current issues often fraught with the concept of Western cultural media imperialism. BTS's success is significant, as they are the first non-Western music group in history to see an album hit number one on the Billboard 200, potentially signaling a long-standing paradigm shift at least where listenership is concerned.¹⁷ This is accentuated by the fact that much of BTS's fan base is comprised of the up-and-coming generation that will further shape the direction in which the world is heading; and according to Pew Research Center, younger generations seem to be more favorable toward ideas of inclusivity.¹⁸ In fact, virtual ethnographic study demonstrates that this younger generation of BTS fans is already making an impact by harnessing their power in numbers and tech-savvy know-how in digital communities that are largely responsible for the success of BTS. For example, musical awards such as the Billboard's Top Social Artist of the Year (which BTS won consecutively from 2017–2021) are decided based on major fan interactions with music, including streaming and social engagement together with global online voting results. Since Top Social Artist is awarded based on virtual fan interactions, and it is likely that these fans are geographically scattered across the globe, the helpfulness of this statistic is not immediately apparent given that this research specifically concerns BTS's popularity in the U.S. However, what the award of Top Social Artist does show us is that BTS's fan base, regardless of geographic location, has collectively fostered the popularity of BTS in the U.S. through its passionate promotion of the band in the digital realm. This is especially true on platforms like YouTube and Twitter where BTS fan propaganda can quickly become viral and thus extremely visible to U.S. audiences. Furthermore, it is possible (based on data like we saw from Pew Research) that BTS's fan

17. Philip Merrill, "BTS Become First K-Pop Band To Debut At No. 1 On Billboard 200," May 29, 2018, <https://www.grammy.com/news/bts-become-first-k-pop-band-debut-no-1-billboard-200>.

18. Jacob Poushter and Janell Fetterolf, "A Changing World: Global Views on Diversity, Gender Equality, Family Life and the Importance of Religion," Pew Research Center, April 22, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/04/22/a-changing-world-global-views-on-diversity-gender-equality-family-life-and-the-importance-of-religion/>.

base which is largely comprised of young internationals could be politically motivated to help boost BTS to the top, seeing this as their contribution toward building a world of inclusivity while slowly chipping away at the longstanding walls of the Western music industry which have in many ways perpetuated Western dominance by favoring Western artists.

BTS as a Strategized South Korean Cultural Export

In addition to its strong virtual fan base which has helped to boost the band's popularity in the U.S., BTS's success has also been boosted by the Korean culture industry and South Korean government itself. Scholars have pointed out that the exportation and promotion of K-pop has been strategically planned by Korea's production company, which has continually been branding the contemporary music genre as a cultural consumer product that would be able to attract an international audience. In accordance with the anticipated outcome of these strategies, K-pop's popularity has continued to grow globally and has been transformed into a soft power boosting South Korean tourism and consumer sales from international fans.¹⁹ This has certainly been the case with BTS, who are bringing an estimated \$5 billion a year to South Korea. This is approximately half a percent of the country's entire economy.²⁰ Even BTS's popularity among U.S. fans was partially made possible by the intentionally targeted strategies of the South Korea's culture industry, the fact that U.S. audiences have been receptive to BTS on such a large scale has regardless begun paving the way for other successful non-Western artists in a previously Western-dominated music industry. And the more BTS grows in its popularity – and thus power – the more they have the ability to shape perceptions of the race they represent.

BTS as Cultural Ambassadors?

19. Kim, *The Korean Wave*, 3.2: "The Korean culture industry was developed for socio-economic cultural and political reasons in the late 1990's."

20. Stacey Vanek Smith, "How BTS Is Adding An Estimated \$5 Billion To The South Korean Economy A Year," August 6, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/06/1025551697/how-bts-is-adding-an-estimated-5-billion-to-the-south-korean-economy-a-year#:~:text=BTS's%20popularity%20is%20fueling%20tourism,of%20the%20country's%20entire%20economy.>

Racial or ethnic identity is a sensitive yet important topic which must be addressed as an integral part of this discussion. As BTS has gained ground in the American pop music scene, they have released an increasing number of singles entirely in English. In contrast, in much of their previous success, the band's songs were either all or partially in Korean. This has caused backlash from both fans and critics who have accused the band of essentially "selling out"; releasing songs in English only so that they can reach a wider audience, make more money, and climb the Western ladder of success. Furthermore, critics have questioned the authenticity of K-pop's music such as BTS's when it begins to lose its cultural properties; of which language has often been a key element. However, as I will later demonstrate through my analysis of BTS's music in the third section of this paper, even with the use of linguistic hybridization, BTS is inseparable from their Korean identities, and their music can — and often does — still carry deep cultural weight, regardless of the language the music is released in.²¹ Furthermore, BTS's English hits have enabled them to reach a broader audience than they would have by only releasing songs in Korean and while this has likely come with exponentially increased financial and exposure benefits, this has also led listeners to explore the non-English music of BTS, serving as a sort of appetizer for BTS's Korean music. In many cases this has become a ripple effect, turning passive listeners into superfans who not only enjoy the music of BTS both in English and Korean but have inspired them to study the culture of BTS on a broader level from learning the language to visiting South Korea itself.

It is logical to consider that exposure and interaction creates familiarity which then creates understanding, providing the perspective that different cultures are at once distinct from one another and yet at the same time often share common ground. From this standpoint BTS, by becoming a point of exposure to Korean culture for many U.S. listeners, play important roles as cultural ambassadors that contribute to building a world that is respectful of varying races and cultures. This signifies the power and importance of BTS's music, which I believe has gone largely unnoticed by those outside of its fandom.

21. For more discussion on lingual hybridization see Youna Kim, "Introduction," in *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*, Ed. Youna Kim (London: Routledge, 2017), 17.

While BTS's success in the U.S. comes with some positive cultural effects, unfortunately, this success, along with that of K-pop in general, has also come with some negative consequences such as the perpetuation of stereotypes or expectations from which some Asian artists have struggled to break free from, as Eunyoung Jung explains in her monograph, "K-pop Female Idols in the West."²² Some authors have suggested that the widespread craze for K-pop, which some see only as a "Koreannized" version of Western pop, only reinforces Western cultural dominance. However, as Peter Burkholder reminds us, one culture taking aspects of another culture and transforming them, adding indigenous elements along the way, is nothing new in music.²³ Consider composers of the neoclassical style, such as Heitor Villa-Lobos, who took aspects of classic music and added elements of Brazilian music in works like "Bachianas Brasileiras." Villa-Lobos used the current trend in music of his time, one that was fascinated with a return to the old styles of music, as a strategy to produce new compositions with a Brazilian flair that would garner the attention of larger audiences. The question of BTS's music that has still gone unanswered is: What is Korean about it if the Korean language has been removed? Is it possible that Americans are simply attracted to BTS's music simply because it is so similar to American pop? And if BTS's music is really synonymous with pop music and, as John Lie has suggested generally of K-pop, devoid of cultural meaning then can the band really be considered to have any effect on issues of inclusivity?²⁴ The answer to these questions requires, first of all, an understanding of how K-pop emerged out of the convergence of not only Korean and Western cultures, but Japanese culture as well which will be demonstrated in the following section.

II. DEFINING K-CULTURE AND AUTHENTICITY IN THE MUSIC OF BTS

22. Eunyoung Jung, "K-pop Female Idols in the West," in *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*, Ed. Youna Kim (London: Routledge, 2017), 106.

23. "After two world wars, nationalism seemed to be a dangerous relic of the past. In every nation there was a diversity of styles and approaches, and ideas that began in one place were often imitated elsewhere." Peter Burkholder, "History of Western Music," (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2010), 954.

24. John Lie, "What Is the K in Kpop?," 2012.

The Origin, Definition, and History of the Korean Wave

In order to understand what makes K-pop Korean an understanding of how the genre is defined as well as how it developed over a relatively short period of time is necessary. I offer here a definition of K-pop according to how I have perceived it as a Westerner. Without unnecessarily detailing all of the specifics of K-pop's historical development, which can be readily discovered through an internet search or by reading what scholars like John Lie have written in detail, I can offer a general description of K-pop as it presents itself through the example of BTS who, as one of the hottest K-pop groups in the world, have become not just representatives of Korea but of the K-pop genre itself.²⁵ This is not to say that all K-pop groups are the same, but many of them share similar characteristics. K-pop bands are often comprised of a large ensemble (seven, in BTS's case) whose members are highly trained in both singing and dance. The fact that there are a number of members has added a dynamic which may be largely responsible for the group's popularity; multiple personalities mean more potential for fans to connect and add potential of a richer narrative content about the members' lives for fans to follow. K-pop stars are young and tend to be extremely photogenic, exuding a sense of cool with their edgy hairstyles and flashy, stylish attire. The use of heavy makeup is common, even for males. While all BTS members are South Korean by origin, other K-pop groups sometimes contain members coming from neighboring countries such as Taiwan, China, or Japan.

Physical appearances and nationalities of the band members aside, when considering the music itself, it can admittedly be a bit more difficult to distinguish between a K-pop and a Western pop. As several authors have pointed out, it is clear that K-pop, in general, has become considerably different from Korea's traditional music. While traditional Korean music was based on the pentatonic scale, K-pop is diatonic; traditional Korean music's traditional singing style was often raspy and reserved, while dance is a central element of K-pop; traditional Korean music was, of course, in the Korean language, while K-

25. Ibid.

pop often contains at least a few English words. However, if K-pop really is just a Korean version of Western pop, the question must then be asked: What are the elements that make K-pop cultural and distinctly Korean, if any? Or as Lie asks, “What Is the K in K-pop?”

One distinctive feature for fans of BTS is that the messages of the band’s music often transcend messages typical of the pop genre such as adolescent love, refreshingly offering music that speaks to an array of less typical yet resonant topics such the importance of self-love and the struggle to overcome mental illness. Furthermore, it has been speculated that BTS’s music, and K-pop in general may be more attractive to individuals from more conservative households, as it contains fewer references to sex and drugs and vulgar language in contrast to most Western pop music. Conservative values, at least in the public eye, are seeming vestiges in South Korean culture that have their historical roots in Confucianist principles. And these vestiges have likely been an advantage that not only make BTS unique, but appeal to a conservative fan base. There are plenty of parents testifying across the internet about how they appreciate BTS as clean, positive role models for their children, some of whom have become fans themselves.

As I have been mentioning, as far as traditional cultural elements in K-pop are concerned, there often appear to be little to none. In fact, as Korea went through a rapid phase of industrialization and urbanization following its liberation from Japan colonization in 1945, South Korean traditional music fell by the wayside, as Koreans began to embrace musical influences from the West. However several BTS performances interestingly revive some of these old traditional elements from South Korean music of the past, signaling, perhaps a revitalized interest in traditional customs among contemporary Koreans. Furthermore, as reporters like T.K. Park and Youngdae Kim have speculated, Korea’s culture industry may be becoming privy to the notion that international consumers are partly attracted to K-pop due specifically because of its perceived cultural properties. This is an important aspect that sometimes sets

K-pop apart from the general pool of pop music.²⁶ In BTS's performance of "IDOL" at the 2018 Melon Music Awards, for example, the audience was treated to a pop performance that incorporated traditional South Korean instruments, attire, props, and gestures. Many of BTS's music videos are also shot to backdrops showcasing traditional Korean architecture or beautiful nature landscapes, with these features likely being intended to subtly entice potential future tourists. Often, these videos also contain hidden symbolism or less subtle references to Korean traditional culture. As just one example, the official music video for BTS's "IDOL" contains images of a rabbit in a moon, which reference a South Korean folk tale called The Moon Rabbit (*Daltokki*), a work that promotes the virtue of self-sacrifice.

Prior BTS's debut in 2013, K-pop was very much seen as a turning away from the old traditional customs of South Korea and rather emphasized blending in as a localization strategy or way of appealing to the masses of specific target cultures. In 2012, Lie wrote,

The radical displacement of traditional values is much clearer in the very popularity of K-pop. In the Korean Confucian worldview, the good life was the gentlemanly life, of which singing would be merely one element in a world that stressed learning. In any case, entertainment and certainly entertainers were devoid of prestige, and not something that would be desirable. Yet, as I suggested, the most popular career choice for young South Koreans — the (South) Korean dream — is to be, to use the unfortunate mixed metaphor, a star in the Korean Wave. All the strivings to be a pop-culture star may be an expression of the new enriched and meritocratic South Korea, but it is surely opposed to the Confucian worldview.²⁷

While BTS is bringing back some traditional Korean musical elements in their music, much of what Lie writes about a change from a Confucianist values to a "new enriched and meritocratic South Korea" often rings true in the K-pop genre in general. This cultural transformation is something Lie later calls a "nearly empty signifier that is South Korean cultural-national identity." Thus, in this sense, K-pop has come to be representative of the modernized South Korean culture of today, even if much of it retains

26 T.K. Park and Youngdae Kim, "How BTS's Embrace of Korean Tradition Helped Them Blow Up," *Vulture*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/09/how-btss-embrace-of-korean-tradition-helped-them-blow-up.html>.

27. Lie, 360.

very little of its cultural heritage. Even if K-pop has taken much of its influence from the West, it is still generally regarded as by as being as distinctly Korean – or in the least, K-pop is categorized as a “foreign pop genre” — and as such retains important consideration as a cultural entity that is gaining popularity in the U.S. This is both new and significant, not just on the global scale, but specifically significant in U.S. popular culture.

K-culture, as the name hints at, refers to Korean culture and this is the umbrella under which all things Korean fall under from Korean dramas (K-dramas) to Korean pop music (K-pop). As I have already mentioned, the Korean Wave (also known as the K-Wave) is a neologism referring to the sudden and widespread popularity of Korean cultural products in that began in the 1990s. An understanding of how the K-wave developed and how it exists today is foundational to the rest of the discussion in this paper so it will be important for me to pause now and briefly provide an outline of that. Following this I will provide clarification as to the exact definition of K-pop and how it is distinguished from other musical genres which is very much connected with how it developed. Finally, I will provide some important background information specifically on about the band BTS as well as their fan base known as A.R.M.Y.

As I mentioned in the introduction of this paper, much has already been written on the Korean Wave, so only a brief overview will be provided here. We have already seen that The Korean Wave emerged in the early 1990s and refers to the sudden rise of interest in South Korean popular culture across the globe. As I also noted in the introduction of this paper, Kim points out that this significant transcultural phenomenon is “the first instance of a major global circulation of Korean popular in history.”²⁸ The original term for Korean Wave, “Hallyu” (the literal translation of which refers to wind blowing over from South Korea), was coined by the Chinese media in 1998 to describe the sudden popularity of South Korean pop culture they were observing amongst youths. The frenzy began with the popularity of South Korean dramas (K-dramas), which increased a demand for other South Korean

²⁸ Kim, *The Korean Wave*, 1.

products, from cosmetics to online games and music. The 1991 K-drama *What is Love?* is sometimes referenced as the television series that started it all, fostering a consequent demand for K-dramas not only in Korea but also in China, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Doobo Shim reports that, partially due to the cheaper cost of Korean programming in contrast with countries such as Japanese and Hong Kong in the years following Asian Financial Crisis, Korean television exports increased dramatically: from \$12.7 billion in 1999 to \$37.5 billion in 2003.²⁹ The 2002 K-drama *Winter Sonata* also played a large part in the Korean Wave genesis, especially among Japanese women living in Japan.

As K-pop rapidly began to gain popularity, it soon became the frontrunner of exported Korean cultural products. The phase of rapid K-pop growth occurring in the late 2000s is sometimes referred to as the Korean Wave 2.0 and was driven by artists like H.O.T. (1996–2001) and Baby V.O.X. (1997–2006). Shortly thereafter, the Korean wave made its way across Europe and to the United States as well, thanks largely to innovations of the digital age. In 2012, Psy’s “Gangnam Style” was released on YouTube and quickly became the platform’s most watched video ever, garnering over 4.3 billion views as of 2022 (YouTube’s most watched video as of 2022 is “Baby Shark Dance,” which was released by the South Korean education brand Pink Fong and has over 10 billion views). Today, attention on the Korean Wave in the U.S. has centered around huge successes like the Academy Award-winning film *Parasite*, the trending television show *Squid Game*, and the aforementioned chart-topping boyband BTS.

The Origin and Definition of K-pop

With the above understanding of the Korean Wave and its development, the task of defining K-pop itself can begin. In the first half of this introduction, I offered a picture of K-pop via description of the band BTS but here I will provide a more comprehensive definition. Reporter Mark Episkopos offers the following succinct definition of K-pop, one which proves to be a great starting point. Episkopos writes, “K-pop refers to a specific aesthetic and performance style that grew out of Korean adaptations of

²⁹ Doobo Shim, 25–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443706059278>.

American popular music in the early 1990's."³⁰ Modern K-pop is a genre of Korean popular music that was pioneered in 1992 with the group Seo Taiji and Boys. This musical genre was developed out of a mix of Western musical styles that included hip hop, electronic dance, jazz, and rock. K-pop bands are typically comprised of a group, as opposed to a solo artist, containing either all male or all female members. The reason for the single gendered groups is typically for the purpose of a more targeted audience (on which the success of K-pop artists hugely depends) or for more practical reasons like shared housing. Reporter Dong Sun-wha helpfully explains that an all-female band tends to attract a large male fan base and an all-male band often attracts a large female fan base, while mixed groups attract less fans overall.³¹ K-pop group members go through rigorous training together to develop skills in singing, dance, and sometimes foreign languages. Another identifying characteristic of K-pop bands is the emphasis of physical beauty of its members and their fashion sense. Plastic surgery is common among K-pop artists who often serve as fashion icons for their fans.

Defining the K-pop can be difficult, as the genre draws on many musical influences and its sound can vary between K-pop groups and even across individual albums. K-pop usually draws entirely on Western musical styles but has sometimes incorporated elements of traditional Korean music. In general, however, the genre is seen as a manifestation of a modernized Korea, developed specifically to become a cultural export, and is mostly removed from any sense of that which is traditionally considered Korean. Much of K-pop performances feature catchy beats, hooks, rapping, and highly developed choreography as key components. BTS's sound specifically has at times tended toward a heavy hip hop style though recent hits such as "Dynamite" and "Permission to Dance" are more "poppy" and dance driven. Some K-pop songs exude a peppy bubblegum pop sound, while still others lean more towards jazz and ballads.

30. Mark Episkopos, "South Korea's Top Export: How K-pop Rose to Conquer the World," June 29, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/south-koreas-top-export-how-k-pop-rose-conquer-world-163707>.

31. Dong Sun-wha, "Why are mixed-gender groups rarely seen in K-pop?", The Korea Times, August 8, 2021, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2021/12/732_314065.html#:~:text=Members%20of%20a%20K%2Dpop,includes%20both%20males%20and%20females.

Lyrics are most often based in Korean, with some English phrases added in. BTS has recently been releasing an increasing number of songs entirely in English, sparking controversy over issues of authenticity and cultural value: matters to be considered in the next section as I continue to paint a picture that fully explains the important aspects making up the genre of K-pop.

***The Authenticity of K-pop and Preserving Korean Cultural Heritage:
K-pop's Relationship with Japan and the U.S.***

As I have been mentioning, many aspects of South Korea's culture, including K-pop seem to be heavily influenced by the West, and particularly by the U.S. With South Korea being located halfway across the globe from the U.S. how is it that that the U.S. has left its mark on the culture so prominently? Furthermore, is it really accurate to say that K-pop is no more than a Koreannized version of Western pop? K-pop's Korean cultural properties cannot be understood without a knowledge of its development in relation to its historical relationship with the U.S. as well as Japan. Lie outlines the historical progression of Korea's move from traditional to modern with sufficient detail in his article "What Is the K in K-pop? South Korean Popular Music, the Culture Industry, and National Identity," which I have drawn on significantly to produce an even sparser sketch of the development in the sentences that follow.³² A full understanding of the historical relationship between South Korea, the U.S. and Japan would require a work that is book length in itself but for the purposes of my argument, I simply aim to provide the most important contextual details. It is important to note, however, that in my doing so much has been left out.

I begin with a brief mention of Korea's earliest traditional music. Lie identifies two distinct yet connected cultures in Korean music in the latter half of the Chosun-dynasty period of 1392-1897: the elite Chinese-influenced culture which was saturated in Confucian principles and thus prized the quiet and orderly, and the music of the common people built in shamanistic rituals which carried intense emotional and expressive properties.³³ The commonality between these two musical styles is that they

32. Lie, 2012.

33. Ibid, 341.

were primarily pentatonic (as opposed to most Western music primarily in the diatonic). At this time, dancing was a part of both courtly and country culture but was a separate art from music. Lie summarizes the musical sensibility of traditional Korea that immediately preceded Japanese or Western influence as being “in harmony with the cultural sensibility of Confucian Korea.” Put another way, early Korean music was serious, and respectful, with wholesome lyrics that promoted values such as familial love.³⁴

The start of the evolution from the traditional to the modern in Korean music did not begin directly with the country’s relationship with the U.S. but with Japan, a country with a long and complex history in relation to South Korea that goes at least as far back as the Japan–Korea Treaty of 1876. Japan eventually annexed Korea in 1910, ushering in a thirty–five–year period of Japanese colonization. During this time, South Korea’s industrialization was accelerated, with many aspects of traditional culture being overshadowed by Japanese imperialization. In addition to its own customs, Japan also brought with it a certain Western influence, as Japan itself had been attuned to Western musical forms, from classical to ballads, since the mid–nineteenth century.³⁵

In 1945, after Japan’s surrender at the end of World War II, the regions of North and South Korea were split, with Soviet troops occupying the North and U.S. troops occupying the South. With some initial resistance notwithstanding, South Korea’s music began to slowly be affected by Western musical influence that was brought in by U.S. troops who brought with them their diatonic popular music – jazz, blues, pop, and rock.

Another factor influencing the modernization of Korean culture was the birth of South Korea’s culture industry around 1950. South Korea’s popular music which had once been synonymous with the folk was replaced new styles of “popular music” in which K–pop eventually grew roots. The old popular music of Korea did not ever fully disappear, however. Throughout the 70’s and beyond, traditional, folk,

34. Ibid.

35. Kōsuke, Nakamura. *Seiyō no Oto, Nihon no Mimi* [Western Sounds, Japanese Ears] (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1987) in *What Is the K in K–pop?*, 342.

and other forms of early popular Korean music retained some level of popularity, though it was slowly dying out. This was especially true in the countryside, where “trot,” a Korean variant of the Western-influenced Japanese *enka* (still very much pentatonic), prevailed. Nonetheless, South Korean popular music was steadily moving away from its traditional roots as the country continued to become modernized and this was, understandably, a concern for the traditionalists of the country.

As I alluded to above, the complete acceptance of Western musical styles in South Korea was not without opposition at first. In the beginning, when the pentatonic scale still dominated South Korean music, the diatonic music of the West was a harsh contrast to many South Koreans that might have even sounded more like noise than music. At first, Western music mostly appealed to younger generations but as, Lie points out, the government had concerns about the potential corrupting effects of “American” music — and especially rock, given its associations of sex, drugs, and political deviance — even going so far as to ban the music for a period in the 70s.³⁶

Over time, however, and with the increased presence of television and radio in South Korean households helping to further normalize Western customs, government inhibitions began to fade. In 1992, an early popular Korean group, Seo Taije and the Boys, made their debut being the first native group to incorporate rap and hip-hop styles into their music. Seo Taije and the Boys also fully embraced the diatonic scale, making their sound very much distinct from the Korean soundscape before it. With these innovative musical factors along with the key addition of dance choreography (which was likely inspired by giant pop stars of the time including icons such as Michael Jackson), Seo Taiji and the Boys became the leading pioneers of K-pop.

What the historical progression of South Korean music from traditional to modern as outlined above demonstrates is that K-pop is Korean, at least inasmuch as it is a reflection of the rapid transformation the country has undergone with strong influences from Japan, the U.S., and its own developing culture industry. Even the lingual hybridization — so present in K-pop that it has nearly come

36. Lie, *What Is the K in Kpop*, 347.

to be a defining element of the genre — tells the story of a country that, in its rapid modernization, has in many ways been transformed into a globalized society. This transformation has led to a huge boost in South Korea’s economy, largely through its cultural exports, which, as demonstrated in the success of K–pop and other products, are attracting growing numbers of international consumers. Today, K–pop in many ways has come to represent South Korea as its leading cultural export and, as such, has come to be an icon of South Korean popular culture. Recognizing K–pop as the leading cultural export representing South Korea today despite the fact that it has been thought to retain little to no ties with the country’s traditional culture, we are then left to consider the future of South Korea’s traditional culture. Will South Korea’s cultural heritage continue to fade like much of the ancient traditional architecture of Seoul that has been demolished, in order to make way for the new and modern skyscrapers that now fill the city’s sky?

Indeed, the prevalence of South Korea’s traditional culture in its own country has experienced a decline in the past few decades. However, there are organizations working diligently to preserve it as a part of a multi–level heritage preservation system being administered by South Korea’s Cultural Heritage Administration (CHA). As part of preservation efforts like these, important cultural treasures, like the folksong “Arirang” and the musical artform *pansori* (a traditional style of singing that combines elements of storytelling and drama), have been successfully added to UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity’s list.³⁷ Furthermore, South Korean traditional culture, while having experienced a decline, is nowhere near extinct. Each year dozens of festivals are hosted in many of the country’s regions with South Koreans and tourists flocking to enjoy holidays and spend time with their friends and families. Traditional dance and music performances abound here, and numerous concessions stands sell traditional foods alongside other popular more modern snacks. In addition, those attending festivals or tourist sites can often learn about or participate in forms of traditional craft making such as calligraphy and pottery.

37. Chung Ah–young, “‘Arirang’ Makes it to UNESCO Heritage,” *The Korea Times*, December 6, 2011, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/culture/2013/03/317_126329.html.

Koreans and tourists can also experience traditional Korean culture by visiting several traditional villages and heritage sites like Jeonju Hanuk Village. In places like these, they can explore traditional Korean houses (*hanuk*) and wear traditional clothes (*hanbuk*).

Another way that South Korean culture is being preserved is through its popular K–dramas. In contrast to K–pop, which is typically deplete of traditional culture (but not always as we will later see), K–dramas which are another leading cultural export of South Korea are often set in the past and continually generate an interest in traditional South Korean culture by foreign fans and modern Koreans too even if the stories are sometimes Romanticized or embellished, or contain fictional elements.³⁸ One example is the 2019 historical K–drama “Kingdom” which received critical acclaim and enjoyed popularity among both Korean and international audiences (in part thanks to its being made available on Netflix and dubbed in multiple languages).³⁹ The story, which is set in the period of 16th century South Korea during the Joseon Dynasty, portrays historical and traditional aspects of South Korean culture. This includes costumes designed in accordance with historical research and dialogue that strove to accurately portray the time period.⁴⁰ In an interview, screenwriter of the series, Kim Eun–hee, clearly indicated her intentions for the series, stating, “I could never have imagined the popularity [of ‘Kingdom’]. I did my best to make it as Korean as possible because I wanted people to see it and become more curious about Korea.”⁴¹ I have included these few notes about K–dramas here as they partially paved the way for K–pop

38. K–dramas initially spearheaded the Korean Wave in the 90s before later being surpassed by K–pop in consumer sales.

39. Ywo Jun–suk, Netflix attributes popularity of ‘Kingdom’ to technological innovation,” February 6, 2019, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20190206000121>.

40. Daron James, “‘Kingdom’ Artists Make Medieval Zombie Tale Seem Real in South Korean Netflix Series,” *Variety*, January 31, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/artisans/production/netflix-south-korea-zombie-series-kingdom-1203123242/>.

41. Jess Rapir, “‘Kingdom’ Creator Admits To Unexpected Global Success Of K–Drama, Teases Worldwide Scale Production In Next Seasons,” *Business Times*, March 6, 2020, <https://www.btimesonline.com/articles/127938/20200306/kingdom-creator-admits-unexpected-global-success-k-drama-teases-worldwide.htm>.

as the primary cultural exports that started the Korean Wave and also to provide an example of how South Korean culture is being preserved even in modern art forms.

As indicated above, Korean traditional culture, while seemingly becoming more of Korea's nostalgic past than a primary part of everyday life for most 21st century South Koreans, is being preserved through official efforts by its cultural heritage preservation system as well as through many facets of its popular culture industry such as K-dramas. Despite what critics have argued, K-pop has also contributed to the preservation or interest in its cultural heritage in numerous ways and it has even become an important icon of national pride and identity especially among the younger generation. As I mentioned earlier in this paper, examples of this include BTS's incorporation of traditional music elements in some of their performances and music videos. These include dance, language, traditional Korean instruments, clothing, props, gestures, symbols, architecture, and landscapes. All of these elements can be seen in both the live and music video productions of BTS's "*IDOL*," which will be analyzed in the following section. It is important to note that while the special performance of "*IDOL*," I am about to analyze was clearly reworked to emphasize cultural elements more so than would typically be done in BTS's music, let alone K-pop in general, the performance provides a useful and concrete example not only of how K-pop is capable of carrying significant cultural meaning and preserving its heritage, but also the performance as well as the music video (which as I mentioned also contains a plethora of cultural symbolism) demonstrate how BTS's music is effective in introducing and inspiring fans to South Korean culture, ultimately playing a part in a growing movement that aims to build a world that turns from Western dominance and is more cultural inclusive. In order to thoroughly explain the cultural depth present in BTS's traditional performance of "*IDOL*," the analysis to follow will be divided into three parts: visual, lyrical, and musical.

III. ANALYZING SOUTH KOREAN CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN BTS'S "IDOL"

A Visual Analysis

On December 1, 2018, BTS performed a special rendition of their hit "*IDOL*" at the Melon Music Awards (MMA), combining both elements of modern and traditional Korean culture through both aural

and visual displays. The performance opens with a dark stage suddenly illuminated by a backdrop of red and blue flames, two primary colors of the Korean flag (in addition to white and black). The red symbolizes positive cosmic forces of the universe, while the blue symbolizes the negative. Interlocked in the circular symbol at the center of the Korean flag (the symbol is called *t'aegŭk* in Korean), these colors represent the concept of duality or polarity and balance in the universe, conceptions derivative of the ancient Chinese philosophy of yin and yang (or *eum-yang* in Korean).⁴²

In the spotlight, and amidst screams from excited fans, the first BTS member to make an appearance is J-Hope who rises from the stage floor wearing a *hanbok*-inspired outfit (*hanbok* refers to traditional clothing of Korea). Surrounding J-Hope are fourteen female dancers, also dressed in *hanbok*. J-Hope and the dancers are each framed by a set of three traditional Korean drums. This is the formation for a traditional Korean Drum dance genre (which is derived from the oldest traditions of Buddhist drum dance) called *Samgo-mu*. The dance is characterized by dignified and uniform movements in which dancers simultaneous dance and beat the three drums that surround them with two sticks.

After a brief introductory dance, J-Hope produces a large fan, also an important icon in Korean culture. At this moment, the spotlight is moved from J-Hope to a second member, Jimin (also dressed in traditional garb), who enacts a fan dance called *buchaechum*. This is another type of traditional Korean dance, although it was only invented in 1954, the dance's creation was influenced by both Korean shamanic ritual dances and traditional Joseon court and folk dances.⁴³ In recognition for his part of the performance, Jimin later received special acknowledgement from the Kim Baek Bong Korean Fan Dance Conservation Society. The plaque awarded to him reads, "By having reinterpreted the beautiful Korean fan dance in a unique way, you have made a great contribution in raising the status and aesthetic value of

42. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Flag of Korea, South," Accessed March, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/flag-of-South-Korea>.

43. "Traditional Dances," Sounds of Korea, KBS World, October 24, 2018, http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents_view.htm?lang=e&menu_cate=&id=&board_seq=349739.

the Korean fan dance globally.”⁴⁴ Actually, J–Hope’s dance draws from a second Korean dance which is called *halyeong–moo*. This dance was traditionally performed by noblemen (as opposed to females, who usually performed the fan dance), and its movements represent the elegance and poise of the ancient Korean elite.⁴⁵ At the completion of this brief dance spotlight, Jimin produces a handkerchief, signaling that yet another cultural dance will follow.

Just as the spotlight moves from J–Hope to Jimin in the first cut, it now switches to spotlight a third member, Jungkook, who enacts a third dance, the traditional mask dance commonly known in Korea as *talchum* (or depending on the geographic region and setting, *sandae nori*, *ogwangdae*, *yaryu*, or *deulloreum*).⁴⁶ The Korean mask dance is a form of satirical drama that incorporates mask–wearing, singing, and dancing. While the term *talchum* originally referred only to a form of mask dance originating in the Hwanghae Province, it eventually became a term that referred generally to all mask dance art forms.

After Jungkook completes his mask dance segment, the stage then opens to another display of Korean traditional dance, *pungmulnori*. This is signaled by the entrance of two “lions” (teams of costumed dancers) and a troop of musicians with traditional instruments wearing white traditional style clothing with red sashes. *Pungmulnori* is a type of art that includes drumming, singing, and dancing that is often acrobatic. It was originally enacted in farming communities as a wish for good harvest but later became a popular performance at various celebrations. This dance also became an opening act for another type of dance called *namsadangnori*, a largescale performance combining circus and musical acts.

44. Koreaboo, “BTS’ Jimin Received An Award From A Cultural Conservation Society For His Epic Fan Dance,” February 26th, 2019, <https://www.koreaboo.com/news/bts-jimin-korean-fan-dance-award/>.

45. BySTorm, “[BTS Glorious Moments] MMA IDOL Explained by K–A.R.M.Y. 1&2 (Korean Traditional version IDOL stage),” February 28, 2022, <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=TA5X24c2FhI>.

46. Korea.net, “Masks & Mask Dance,” Culture, September 16, 2014, <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=121717>.

After the *pungmulnori* dance segment has ended, the full BTS septet appears at the center of the stage. There is a clear break in the music, signaling the end of the “traditional” introduction and moving to the more modern version of “IDOL” that the group normally performs. This includes more modern dance choreography, although influence from the traditionally inspired dances can still be detected. At this point, it becomes more obvious that the BTS members are wearing clothing that is not fully traditional but instead is mixed with modern as if to send a message confirming the intentional mixing of the two musical styles/periods, again alluding to the concept of duality so central to Korean culture as seen in the symbolism of its flag and colors above. Here is where the first actual singing occurs, as up to this point, everything has been dance driven.

As is clear in this visual analysis, BTS’s “IDOL” the performance is replete with elements of Korean traditional culture from images, colors and symbols being projected to clothing, dance, and props being used. We will continue to uncover more cultural elements in the lyrical analysis to follow.

Lyrical Analysis

In analyzing the lyrics to “Idol,” we can see some important cultural connections that partially explain why BTS’s music is especially resonant with younger generations (both Korean and international) as well as understand an aspect of embedded South Korean identity. Interestingly, the opening two lines of “IDOL” are in English, followed by a line of Korean. This lingual hybridization continues throughout the song and ends up being an almost even split between the two languages by the end (interesting providing yet another instance of duality). In the lyrics below, words in brackets indicate lyrics translated from Korean and ellipses indicate repeated lines that have been removed. The lyrics to “IDOL” are as follows:

You can call me artist (artist)
You can call me idol (idol)
[No matter what you call me]
I don't care
I'm proud of it (proud of it)
[I'm free (free)]
No more irony (irony)
[Cuz I was always just me]

*[They point fingers at me]
[but I don't care at all]
[Whatever the reason for your criticism is]
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)*

*[Keep on chit–chatting, saying this and that]
Talkin', talkin', talkin'
I do what I do, [so you do you]
Dirty dirty
You can't stop me lovin' myself*

*[Ulssu,⁴⁷ I like it]
You can't stop me lovin' myself
Hoo, hoo, [I like the shouts]
You can't stop me lovin' myself*

*Oh oh ooh oh
Oh oh ooh oh oh oh
Oh oh ooh oh
[Dunkiduk kungduruhruh]⁴⁸*

...

*Face off [like John Woo], ay
Top star with that spotlight, ay
[Sometimes like a superhero]
[I am your Anpanman]
[Twenty–four hours isn't enough]
[Can't afford to be confused]
Ho! I do my thang (I do my thang)
I love myself*

*I love myself (I love myself), I love my fans
Love my dance and my what
[There are hundreds of me's]
[inside of me]
[I am facing a new me again today]
[So instead of worrying, I'm just gonna run]
Runnin' man
Runnin' man
Runnin' man, bluh*

47. *Ulssu* is an interjectory word shouted during a performance of Korean traditional music as a means of encouraging the performer.

48. This is a Korean onomatopoeic expression imitating the sound of a drum.

...

*I'm so fine wherever I go
[Even if it takes a while sometimes (oh)]
It's okay, I'm in love with my-my myself
It's okay, [I'm happy in this moment]*

...⁴⁹

In the repeated phrase “You can’t stop me lovin’ myself” we find a central message of self-love, self-worth, and being true to oneself above all else. These lyrics carry a resonant message for South Koreans growing up in a culture fraught with overbearing pressures to perform well in school, achieve financial success, and project an image that one is successful.⁵⁰ The lyrics to “IDOL” also have a dualistic meaning that expresses feelings of the band itself which has sometimes faced harsh criticism and certain pressures because of being in the public eye. This idea is evident in the opening lyrics, “You call me artist/ You call me idol/ No matter what you call me/ I don’t care/ I’m proud of it/ I’m free/ No more irony/ Cuz I was always just me.” BTS, by expressing so strongly its counter-cultural commitment of not caring what others think or say, inspires its millions of young fans to do the same, offering a release from what is likely a deeply rooted burden resulting from embedded cultural expectations that are difficult to

49. BTS, “Idol,” 2018. Translated by Color Coded Lyrics (CCL), <https://colorcodedlyrics.com/>. CCL is a website that publishes language translations by K-pop fans. This voluntary translation service, sometimes called “fan subbing,” is one of the unique and fascinating aspects connected to BTS fandom and is often mentioned in BTS scholarship. For this reason, I intentionally wanted to provide fan translated lyrics here as a demonstration. Lyrics provided by BTS fans are usually highly accurate, as fans of BTS are notorious for being vehemently protective of the band and have often expressed that accurate representation of BTS is of critical importance to them. CCL’s website can be found here: <https://colorcodedlyrics.com/>.

50. Sources: Yonhap, “Adolescents have thought about suicide over academic pressure: poll,” *The Korea Herald*, July 24, 2019, [33](http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20190724000749#:~:text=The%20biggest%20reason%20was%20the,family%20conflict%20at%2017.9%20percent;Y.%20Cha%20and%20Y.%20Kwon,“An%20Empirical%20Encounter%20of%20Cultural%20Orientation%20and%20Cultivation%20Theory%20Factors%20of%20Perception%20of%20Materialistic%20Realities%20and%20Dealing%20With%20Materialism%20of%20University%20Students%20in%20South%20Korea,”Asian%20Journal%20for%20Public%20Opinion%20Research,7(4),226-250,https://doi.org/10.15206/ajpor.2019.7.4.226;Elise%20Hu,“The%20All-Work,%20No-Play%20Culture%20Of%20South%20Korean%20Education,”Parallels,NPR,April%2015,%202015,https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/04/15/393939759/the-all-work-no-play-culture-of-south-korean-education.”</p></div><div data-bbox=)

live up to. In another example of duality, the cultural expectations presented here not only reflect South Korea but speak to the universal quest for self-worth relevant in any culture. This helps us to understand one element of K-pop that has allowed it to rise in popularity transnationally.

Beyond self-worth, BTS's lyrics speak to matters of culture and identity in other ways as well. The second section of lyrics which follow the ones discussed above reads, "They point fingers at me/ But I don't care at all/ Whatever the reason for your criticism is/ I know what I am/ I know what I want/ I never gon' change/ I never gon' trade." These lyrics are likely in part a response to criticism the band has faced over various concerns raised by both fans and critics. One of those reasons which has already been touched on briefly in this paper regards controversy over BTS's release of singles entirely in English. A concern that has been raised is that BTS's music loses its Korean-ness when stripped of its native language. This is an issue hotly debated in places like online forums. When a fan posted the question, "Why is K-A.R.M.Y. angry at BTS for making Dynamite an English song?"⁵¹ another fan, Scarlett Suvillian, offered the following explanation:

I can understand where [BTS fans are] coming from because bts is kpop and they're meant to be representing Korea. But k-armies have got to understand that bts has to change up their style once in a while. I gotta admit, even tho I'm an international A.R.M.Y., I'd get pretty upset if they produce too many songs completely in English because it'll just lose 1 unique thing about their music and it'll basically just be pop not kpop. But if k-armies have to understand that bts is allowed to do this. K-armies may finally understand the pain of reading subtitles, since they've been having an advantage so far. So this little thing that made [BTS fans] angry, it's petty but at the same time understandable.⁵²

This comment represents well the main issue many K-pop fans and critics have with BTS releasing songs in English: without Korean lyrics, K-pop loses its uniqueness as being Korean and becomes

51. Posted by Jung Kim. <https://www.quora.com/Why-is-K-A.R.M.Y.-angry-at-BTS-for-making-Dynamite-an-English-song>, Accessed March 6, 2022. Also see Ashley Turner's article, "With 'Permission to Dance,' Some BTS Fans Question the Group's Direction," *The Wrap*, July 9, 2021, <https://www.thewrap.com/with-permission-to-dance-some-bts-fans-question-the-groups-direction/>.

52. *Ibid.*

indistinguishable from any other pop. In essence, then, it (arguably) ceases to represent South Korea. That is only the opinion of some fans, however. While there are people on both sides of this issue, the majority of forum comments shows that most fans see BTS's release of English songs positively and are happy because this has allowed BTS's popularity to grow, adding to the band's overall success and ability to move up into the limelight of the U.S. popular music scene.

BTS's release of English songs, as some fans have also pointed out, is a logical choice for BTS since English is considered to be a global language. While this makes sense, especially from a business standpoint, some BTS fans are obstinately in opposition, remaining firm in their assertions that see BTS's release of fully English songs as a sell-out. In the same forum referenced above, Daniel Baker provides some balanced reflections on the issue from his perspective as a fan,

BTS have been the ambassadors for a music industry that beforehand, stayed within South Korea's borders. They have brought forth a change that no-one in South Korea thought possible; they pathed their way into the International market and opened the doors to a time where their Korean music has now surpassed the music of the language of the exclusive Western market. BTS have broken many records and have always had something to prove; you do not need to sing in English to achieve mass success in the West which is easily the most successful and dominant side of the global music industry. BTS did that, and have heights they still have not reached. The thought of BTS finally freeing themselves of that boundary, and stepping outside of that goal, is what deters Korean viewers. To them, it appears that BTS are conforming to the standards of the West and giving up in a goal that they likely held close to their hearts. To them, BTS is losing themselves.⁵³

It is easy to understand how BTS's release of fully English songs can be seen as a sell-out, especially when the band has explicitly expressed that this something they were originally against.⁵⁴ However, just as South Korea has historically had to adapt in order to survive and compete economically on the global level (paralleling in a similar sense to the fact that English language learning that become a central aspect

53. Ibid.

54. Rebecca Davis, "BTS is What the World Needs Now: Band Members Talk Going Global, the Responsibility of Being Role Models," *Variety*, October 2, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/bts-members-talk-going-global-1234791114/>.

of South Korea's success-driven culture), BTS has understood that they also must adapt in order to reach new heights of success on the international scene. RM, BTS bandleader, said the following in an interview with *Variety*,

The 'K' in K-pop is, of course, important. We all grew up in Korea. None of us studied abroad or spent a lot of time abroad. It was only after we began to perform on global stages and really go outside of Korea that we really started identifying as Korean. It reaffirmed that we are in fact Korean and have a Korean identity. But of course, we live in a very cosmopolitan world. Our Korean identity is very clear, but we also increasingly have a more global mindset.⁵⁵

RM's comment illuminates an important point: you can take the Korean language out of the music, you can't take out the Korean.

Still, it is interesting to consider that while BTS has been able to make unprecedented success for a foreign language song by reaching the No. 4 spot on the Billboard Hot 100 with "On" (which is mostly in Korean), it was not until their release of the fully English hit, "Dynamite" that they were able to reach the No. 1 spot on U.S. charts. Based on this premise, a few things can be surmised about the current realities and limitations of the Western music industry as far as foreign music is concerned. First, the Western popular music industry clearly (and understandably) favors English as that is the first language of the majority of its consumers. Therefore, in order to achieve the highest level of success in the Western realm of the popular music industry, performers must release their music in English. Secondly, English, after all, is currently the dominating global language. As such, perhaps it should not be viewed as another example of perpetuated Western dominance but rather as a tool shared by all cultures that helps cross cultural barriers such as language — just as BTS has done with their music by incorporating English into their songs to reach a broader audience. This is certainly neither to insinuate that other cultures ought to adopt other Western practices nor condone any kind of cultural chauvinism. It is only to point out that, in the pursuit of a harmonious world where cultural differences are understood, respected, and celebrated,

55. Ibid.

established bridges as in the use of English as a global language are not only useful but essential for communication between cultures.

BTS has expressed their desire to cross barriers with their music. This is one reason that has driven them to utilize all of their resources to reach audiences, even if that means having a willingness to change perspective and try something new, like releasing all English singles. While it is unclear what pressures the band may have experienced from the industry side of things to produce songs in English, one thing *is* clear: BTS is known to co-produce and co-write most of their output. Their mission from the beginning has been one of spreading positive messages to its audience, making the band much more than just a consumer product of the K-pop industry. This idea is not only evidenced by BTS's support of numerous philanthropic causes but also in their lyrics, which is our topic at hand.⁵⁶

As I have been demonstrating, the lyrics to “IDOL” express BTS's struggles as a band in the face of criticism while speaking out about social issues embedded in South Korean culture (many of which have shared applications to other cultures). In “IDOL,” BTS expresses the difficulty they have experienced as international superstars faced with the pluralistic challenge of representing their native culture and being true their fans while at the same time adapting in order to relate to an international audience and also achieve their own dreams of ultimate success. This trichotomy is expressed in the following lyrics:

Face off like John Woo, ay/ Top star with that spotlight, ay/ Sometimes like a superhero/ I am your Anpanman/ Twenty-four hours isn't enough/ Can't afford to be confused/ Ho! I do my thang (I do my thang)/ I love myself.

The lyrics “Face off like John Woo/ Top star with that spotlight” are more than likely a reference to the Chinese film director John Woo, who successfully broke into the Hollywood scene as an international and

56. BTS has been outspoken about and contributed financially to a number of causes, including the Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate movements, inspiring their fans to do the same. More information can be found here: Diane J. Cho, “BTS' Most Generous Moments: From Million-Dollar Donations to Sharing Acts of Kindness,” *People*, November 13, 2021, <https://people.com/music/bts-most-generous-moments/?slide=334a5129-cc9c-4993-ae17-7b549d7ce7da#334a5129-cc9c-4993-ae17-7b549d7ce7da>.

is known for directing the film “Face–Off,” an action thriller whose plot is centered around characters that take on different identities through face transplants. The reference can be understood as a metaphor for BTS’s challenge of feeling that they must embrace multiple identities in their various roles and responsibilities as internationals, musicians, and influencers who also want to rise to the top and “break into” the Western music industry.

The phrase from the above stanza, “I am your Anpanman,” holds both cultural weight and weight for the band in relation to their fans (and is also a self–reference to their 2018 track “Anpanman”). As I explained in the historical discussion in part II above, South Korea has been deeply influenced by Japanese culture. The incorporation of Anpanman in BTS’s “IDOL,” reflects this since Anpanman is a character that was created by Japanese cartoonist Takashi Yanase. Anpanman is an adorable superhero originating in a 1973 Japanese children’s picture book. The character is an anthropomorphized caricature of a popular snack in Japan and Korea that is bread filled with a sweet, red bean paste. Anpanman has one primary superpower, super hearing, that helps him hear anyone in the world calling for his help. Once Anpanman comes across a starving person or creature, he saves them by letting them eat a piece of his bread head, which temporarily weakens the superhero. Anpanman is not like other super heroes such as Batman or Superman with rippling muscles fighting epic battles of good and evil. Instead, he is a humble protector who is self–sacrificially willing to give of his very body for the specific cause of hunger (a story not very unlike that of the Korean moon rabbit folktale).

BTS’s making reference to Anpanman not only reflects South Korea’s historical connection with Japan but is also a touching metaphor BTS chooses to describe the responsibility they feel for their base of superfans, A.R.M.Y., who have often referred to BTS as a lifeline. In an interview for CBC radio, international A.R.M.Y. member Amelie Rols attests, “It was kind of my lifeline. I don’t want to put everything on BTS. It’s not like they cured my depression or anything. But they were a very important crutch, I would say.”⁵⁷ BTS has demonstrated an acute awareness that time is short, and they have a

57. CBC Radio, “How K–pop band BTS is helping fans a world away navigate identity and hardship,” Tapestry, June 5, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/healing–power–of–k–pop–>

remarkable responsibility as role models which comes from many sides. This expressed in the lyrics “Twenty-four hours isn’t enough/ Can’t afford to be confused/ Ho! I do my thang (I do my thang)/ I love myself.” Through these lyrics, BTS promises their fans that they will be strong even when they feel like they are being pulled in all directions. They will “do their thing,” (keep being themselves and making music) and above all else, they will love themselves. This certainly provides an empowering message for BTS fans, many of them internationals, who have experienced the hardships of being degraded for being different while living in countries other than their own. This is also an example for any fans, for that matter, who have been bullied and made to doubt their value for one reason or another.

Beyond the Anpanman reference, the final cultural allusion we find in the lyrics of BTS’s “IDOL” is in the following stanza:

I love myself/ I love my fans/ Love my dance and my what/ There are hundreds of me’s inside of me/ I am facing a new me again today/ So instead of worrying, I’m just gonna run/ Runnin’ man/ Runnin’ man/ Runnin’ man.

In these lyrics, BTS reiterates love for themselves (and who they are) as well as their fans. They acknowledge their complexities as individuals in their statement, “There are hundreds of me’s inside of me.” Nevertheless, they declare that they will not worry but run (presumably not away from but toward their goals). Fans familiar with Korean culture will recognize the significance of the inclusion of the phrase “Runnin’ man,” the name of a popular TV game show in South Korea in which BTS made an appearance in May 2019. In addition, the reference could also be a nod to the title of BTS’s own variety show, “Run BTS!” which first aired in August 2015 on VLIVE, a South Korean live video streaming service.

The above lyrical analysis in which I examined the entirety of BTS’s “IDOL” demonstrate that BTS’s “IDOL” contains layered cultural meanings which have resonated profoundly with both its Korean and international fan base. This lyrical analysis also helps to demonstrate one reason that BTS’s music

pandemic-playtime-music-for-the-soul-1.5600104/how-k-pop-band-bts-is-helping-fans-a-world-away-navigate-identity-and-hardship-1.5600109.

stands out from other Western popular music and has become so popular: this is likely related to an appreciation of international fans for something that is “different” as well as an appreciation for fans in general of music that has lyrical depth which often goes beyond overused and trivial tropes that so often characterize popular music such as romance and break up. BTS’s music offers its fans lyrical depth that not only addresses current issues its listeners are experiencing but also carries deep cultural weight which simultaneously displays differences and similarities between South Korea and other cultures: it acts as an equalizer, showing its listeners that humans experience similar pains and joys in life no matter what their ethnicity is.

Musical Analysis

Having now analyzed “IDOL” from the visual and lyrical perspectives I will finally analyze cultural elements contained in the song from a musical perspective. While not all K-pop songs incorporate elements from traditional Korean music, an increasing number of them seem to be doing so as they follow the lead of BTS in their successes.⁵⁸ BTS’s “IDOL” provides a prime example of incorporating elements of traditional Korean music into K-pop. The nearly three minute extended instrumental introduction to “IDOL” is almost entirely made up of traditional musical elements. Within this special rendition of “IDOL” several traditional instruments are utilized including: (strings) *gayageum* and *haegeum*; (winds) *taepyeongso* and *daegeum*; and (percussion) *janggu*, which is an hourglass-shaped drum, *kangwari*, a brass gong, and *buk*, a barrel-shaped drum.⁵⁹ As there is currently no score available for the traditional rendition of “IDOL” which I will analyze below, I will refer to time stamps for the live video performance provided by one of BTS’s official channels, BANGTANTV, available on YouTube.⁶⁰

58. For examples, see the 2019 article, “12 K-Pop Songs That Incorporate Elements Of Traditional Korean Culture,” by Soompi which can be found online: <https://www.soompi.com/article/1367060wpp/12-k-pop-songs-that-incorporate-elements-of-traditional-korean-culture>.

59. The sounds of these instruments are demonstrated in the following fan video (beginning at 9:02): BySTorm, “[BTS Glorious Moments] MMA IDOL Explained by K-A.R.M.Y. 1&2 (Korean Traditional version IDOL stage),” February 28, 2022, <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=TA5X24c2FhI>.

BTS’s special performance of “IDOL” begins with a traditional percussion ensemble (*Samulnori*) which, as I mentioned at the onset of the visual analysis of this song, is highlighted by the synchronized projection of blue and red (the colors of the Korean flag) flames on the giant backdrop to the performance. Many of the irregular rhythms heard by this ensemble are inspired by those found in the traditional Korean style of music called *pansori*. About forty seconds into the piece, the percussion ensemble is joined by the distinctive *gakguk* horn (a Korean instrument made out of a horn that is shaped like an archery bow).⁶¹ A few seconds later, the *daegeum* (a type of Korean flute) makes an appearance along with one of the Korean string instruments mentioned above (either *gayageum* or *haegeum*).⁶² At 1:26 an EDM–like dance beat blends into the mix, propelling the pace of the music. While this is the first deviation from traditional Korean music, it is a fascinating addition hinting at the blend of musical styles (a conscious effort in multiculturalism) that this performance will develop into. At 1:39 the *taepyeongso* with its quasi horn–flute appearance and sound can be heard. At 1:54 a distinctive hook (notated below), which opens the studio version of “IDOL,” becomes apparent though it is still clothed in traditional sounds.



Example: Two-measure main hook from BTS’s “IDOL.”

At 2:25 the daegum reappears in a higher register taking over the melody for the last few bars of the traditional introduction.

At this point in the music there is a brief pause before the hook gesture from above returns to ring in the section of the music where the lyrics begin. The pattern as well as all of the layers of traditional

60. BTS, “[BANGTAN BOMB] 'IDOL' Special Stage (BTS focus) @2018 MMA – BTS (방탄소년단),” BangtanTV, December 10, 2018, <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=ayG1-igrwy8>.

61 Ibid, (timestamp 0:38).

62. Ibid, (timestamp 0:53).

instruments heard in the introduction continue to repeat throughout the rest of the song beneath hip-hop and rap style verses that are interspersed with brief lyrical gestures that accompany recurring lines such as “you can’t stop me lovin’ myself.” All in all, following the heavily traditional introduction of this piece and once the lyrics begin, the piece becomes a blend of musical styles that combine elements primarily from South Korean traditional music, South African music, and influences from Western pop. As I mentioned above, the intentionality of BTS’s embrace and blending of musical styles is obvious when the music video which utilizes a plethora of symbolic imagery is considered.⁶³

As the above analysis of BTS’s “IDOL” shows, K-pop can be a powerful channel for spreading both traditional and contemporary culture. The argument may be made that “IDOL” is just a single performance and that while it may be seen as a masterful combination of modern and traditional Korean music, it does not necessarily validate the cultural significance of all of K-pop or even all music by BTS. A main concern traditionalists and critics have with K-pop is that, in general, it continues to become more Westernized as a way of appealing to Western consumers to the extent that the music becomes an “empty cultural signifier,” to use Lie’s term. For example, BTS’s most recent hits, like “Dynamite” (2020) and “Butter” (2021), which topped Billboard charts, are both entirely in English, whereas many prior releases were in mostly Korean with the occasional phrase or verse of English sprinkled in. As has already been discussed, this move from lingual hybridity to full-blown English was undoubtedly a strategy to garner a larger English-speaking fan base and concretizes the emphasis of Korea’s culture industry on international export.

On the other hand, BTS’s performance of “IDOL” serves as a demonstration of instances where K-pop can be strongly tied to the cultural heritage of South Korea. BTS has been recognized as a K-pop group that has been one of the first to break from a strategy of attempting to make their music blend in with Western pop styles as a way of fitting in to the mainstream, instead embracing its traditional roots

63. Colette Balmain, “The end of the journey: desire, recognition and redemption in BTS’s ‘IDOL’,” *Language and Learning*, London Korean Links, October 1, 2018, <https://londonkoreanlinks.net/2018/10/01/the-end-of-the-journey-desire-recognition-and-redemption-in-btss-idol/>.

and proudly displaying that in various ways in their music. This break has distinguished BTS from other pop groups and has been cited as one of the possible reasons the group has blown up.⁶⁴ While it was once believed that music being overly Korean with its use of unfamiliar instruments would hinder international appeal and marketability, the opposite has been true for BTS with fans expressing a deep appreciation for and attraction to BTS's authenticity. In the popular music market which is often oversaturated with competing bands that all sound essentially alike, BTS has often offered something different whether it be through their visual presentation, their blend of Korean and English lyrics, or even the occasional incorporation of traditional South Korean music elements.

I would also argue that K-pop is an important icon of South Korean culture and identity which goes beyond its sound and even its language. This ties in with the earlier discussion of K-pop's historical development that inextricably makes it Korean, even if only representative of a modern South Korea. Additionally, K-pop, whether in English or Korean, has led to an increased interest (or return to) Korean culture by both Koreans and internationals. This is particularly in the U.S., which is a central point of this paper and which my ethnographic research demonstrates in the section to follow.

IV. INVESTIGATING THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF BTS FANS IN THE US THROUGH DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Important questions I still have not fully answered are these: who are BTS fans? And more specifically, who are BTS fans in the U.S.? This question is crucial because in order to measure the cultural impact that BTS has had in the U.S., we must identify who BTS fans are, how many they are, and in what ways BTS has potentially fostered a positive attitude and interest in South Korean culture, if at all. These questions are difficult to answer since the physical world has become so intertwined with the digital. On one hand, it is largely because of an increasingly digital world that the popularity of BTS and its A.R.M.Y. can be studied at all. The size of any group's Twitter following, Spotify streams, and

64. T.K. Park and Youngdae Kim, "How BTS's Embrace of Korean Tradition Helped Them Blow Up," *Vulture*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/09/how-btss-embrace-of-korean-tradition-helped-them-blow-up.html>.

YouTube hits are just as important (if not more so) than album, merchandize, and ticket sales, and awards. Furthermore, without the existence of social media comments, forums, fan videos, and so forth, research would be more limited to traditional methods such as surveys and in-person interviews, resulting in severely less availability of data. The difficulty of this digital interconnectedness, and digital ethnography as well, is that it becomes a challenge in the digital world to separate fans according to their nationalities and geographic locations, though, as I will later show, this is not always impossible.

To put the above dilemma situationally, when conducting research, I have often begun by observing audience reactions in the comment section of YouTube videos. Depending on the content of the comment itself, much demographic information can be gleaned either directly or indirectly. The screenshot in Figure 1 taken from the comment section of BTS's official music video for "IDOL," exemplifies this wherein we see at least three languages and cultures represented. While this tells us that BTS has reached an audience of at least three different language speakers, it does not necessarily verify the audience's nationality or geographic location. Initially, we might assume that the individual commentors chose to write in a particular language because that is what they were most comfortable in. Additionally, this choice of language medium indicates a high likelihood that they come from a country where their language of choice is the first language of that country. In other words, based on the language of the first commentor, Николай Такуев, in Figure 3, one might deduce that the writer is Russian or from a Russian-speaking country.⁶⁵ However, with this information alone we cannot know whether this person is living in Russia, in the U.S., or elsewhere. We cannot know if they are a Russian-speaking fan of BTS living in Russia, a Russian-speaking fan living in another country, or perhaps even a U.S. Russian-speaking immigrant, a Russian-speaking student studying in the U.S., or even second, third, fourth, etc. generation Russian/Kazakhstani/Ukrainian/Kyrgyzstani American. Race and ethnicity matters in this discussion since this research is centered on understanding the impact that BTS has made in the West —

65. Video comments: BTS, "BTS (방탄소년단) 'IDOL' Official MV," Hybe Labels, August 24, 2018, <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=pBuZEGYXA6E>.

and in the U.S. specifically, as opposed to internationally. Therefore, it makes a critical difference if BTS's fan base in the U.S. is made up entirely of South Korean Americans or other Asian Americans versus a fan base comprised of a mix of ethnicities that includes Caucasian Americans, African Americans, Latin Americans, and so forth.

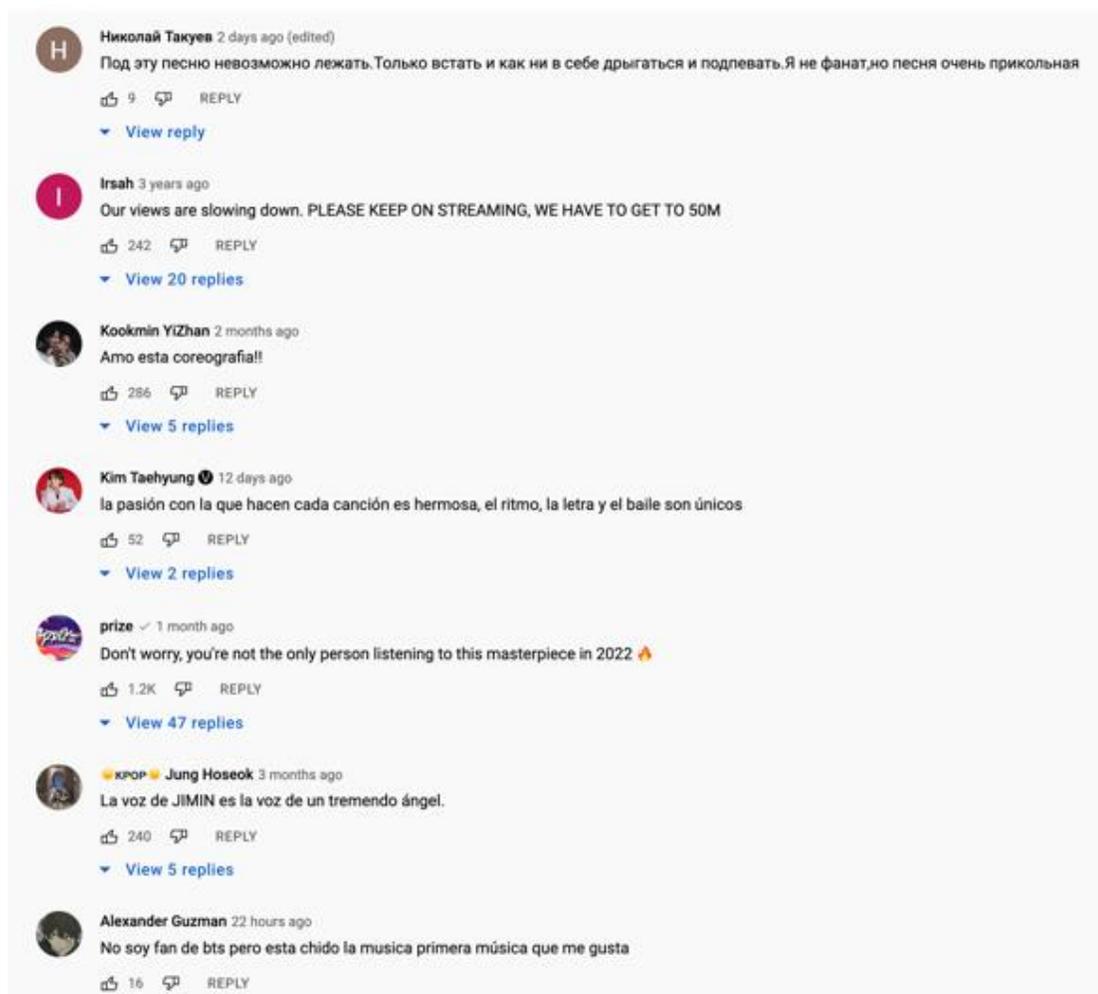


Figure 3: The YouTube comment section from BTS's music video, "IDOL," which demonstrates a multilingual viewership of fans.

If BTS's fan group is largely made up of fans who represent South Korean or Asian minorities on some level, then shared identity could be a major cause of the band's popularity not only for Asian Americans but also for any minority group who are encouraged to see a non-white, non-Western, largely non-English-speaking act rise to the very top. In short, BTS's success means that other minority successes in the U.S. are possible too. This is a sentiment that fans often express in interviews and social

media. In an interview with CBC radio, Michelle Cho, who is a Korean American from Chicago now an assistant professor of East Asian Studies at the University of Toronto says, “Seeing Korean popular culture find mainstream success in North America, in an environment where there really aren't many examples of Asian representation in popular culture, is moving to me in ways that I didn't even expect. . . . It's sort of a visceral feeling of, ‘Wow, there are all these other possibilities for how to inhabit an Asian body that don't have to conform to stereotypes.’”⁶⁶

While fans who often hail from minority groups have often cited identity as one of many reasons they love BTS, platforms like YouTube demonstrate that BTS is empowering a fan base that is not just made up of Asian American minorities. A video by “The Root” posted in February of 2021 consisted of interviews with five Black BTS fans from the West who shared their deep appreciation for the group citing identity and related positive messages of BTS’s music as one of the band’s greater appeals for them. Embedded in the referenced video is a clip from BTS’s 2021 U.N. General Assembly in which band leader RM addresses an audience of over one million people, stating, “No matter who you are, where you’re from, your skin color, your gender identity, just speak yourself.”⁶⁷ Empowering fans no matter what their identity is has always been an important focus for BTS in terms of both their music and how they present themselves in the media.

However, it must be mentioned that the greater K-pop industry has not always been faultless in regards to cultural appreciation versus appropriation, as fans in the Roots video point out. K-pop on the whole has drawn on influences from black culture, which has at times resulted in perceived cultural appropriation from the Black community. One fan in the video states, “Kpop is an industry that profits off of Black culture and Black fans try their hardest to call out and or educate idols and companies that *do* do

66. CBC Radio, “How K-pop band BTS is helping fans a world away navigate identity and hardship,” Tapestry, June 5, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/healing-power-of-k-pop-pandemic-playtime-music-for-the-soul-1.5600104/how-k-pop-band-bts-is-helping-fans-a-world-away-navigate-identity-and-hardship-1.5600109>.

67. BTS Leader RM in “Black BTS Fans Share Why They 'Purple' This K-Pop Group,” The Root, February 11, 2021, <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=EZnSDfshwmg> (05:49).

cultural appropriation.”⁶⁸ Another fan states, “It hurts when someone that you kind of have a care for, that you respect, that you love as a fan, ends up doing something that hurts you and your identity. So, it can be really painful and it can be hard to navigate being a fan with those instances.”⁶⁹ The video goes on to emphasize that while BTS was not exempt from cultural appropriation issues when they first debuted, the band publicly apologized upon being called out by many of their Western fans.⁷⁰ BTS has learned a lot since their debut, and now, as international stars, they are now more careful to acknowledge cultural influences outside their own and even emphasize them at times. This is clear through the visual images in BTS’s music video for “IDOL.” In this production that draws heavily from South African grooves and dances (as well as many elements of traditional Korean culture as has already been demonstrated), there are several scenes that acknowledge the influence of South African culture with imagery of a setting sun, giraffes, and scenes in which BTS wear colorful print suits interpreted by some as being modeled after African cultural dress.⁷¹ This is BTS’s way of acknowledging the influences it has taken from the music of Black cultures as well as showing an appreciation of its Black community of fans.

From what we have seen so far, BTS reaches an ethnically and racially diverse fan base that is at least partially made up of minority groups like Asian Americans and the Black community (though the breakdown of fan numbers and their coordinating ethnicities is still to come). But again, a central aim of this paper is to demonstrate the extent to which BTS is fostering positive attitudes in the U.S. in relation to cultural diversity and inclusion. If BTS’s fan base consists primarily of minority groups who are already fighting for these causes, then BTS’s popularity does little to support my claim that BTS is

68 Ibid., (timestamp 04:18).

69. Ibid., (timestamp 4:33).

70. Ibid., (timestamp 4:52).

71. Colette Balmain, “The end of the journey: desire, recognition and redemption in BTS’s ‘IDOL’,” *Language and Learning*, London Korean Links, October 1, 2018, <https://londonkoreanlinks.net/2018/10/01/the-end-of-the-journey-desire-recognition-and-redemption-in-btss-idol/>.

fostering positive change in this area. Of course, the visibility of BTS in the media alone has surely made a difference, causing some people to take notice. But just is taking notice? Is BTS making an impact on white Americans as well as minority groups? And if so, what sort of impact? These are the questions that must be answered in order to measure the social-cultural significance of BTS's successes in the white-dominated U.S.

As mentioned at the onset of this paper, in my experience, most of the people here in the U.S. demonstrate little knowledge of BTS even despite achievements similar to that of the Beatles (in reference to achieving similar records in music charts and having cult-like fan following). Some Americans might be able to acknowledge that they have heard of BTS, state specifically that they know that BTS is a famous K-pop group or, mention seeing them briefly on TV, though many know little beyond that. This recurring scenario in my personal experiences is largely what has caused me to speculate that that perhaps BTS is mostly paid attention to in the U.S. by minority groups that represent a specific fan base in a niche sector of the music industry who, out of their hyper-dedication to the band, have joined forces with A.R.M.Y. to boost BTS to the chart-topping positions where they are found today. I also speculate that it is because of these chart-topping successes that BTS has gained attention from mainstream U.S. media outlets, news channels, and talk shows that have further spread awareness of BTS to people in the U.S. outside their already established fan base. Whether BTS gained traction in the U.S. mostly thanks to a group initially consisting of minority fans excited to see a non-white musical group make it to the top is not what is important, however. What *is* important, as previously underscored, is understanding how the reach of BTS has extended this fan base to groups *beyond* minorities and how BTS has caused even those in majority groups to become more culturally aware and even accepting. As this is a complicated matter, continued research is needed but so far virtual ethnographic investigation has uncovered some useful data which not only helps paint an accurate picture of BTS's multicultural fan base but also provides evidence as to the scope of BTS's positive and growing impact in important areas of concern such as cultural inclusivity. In the following paragraphs I will demonstrate these findings first by discussing BTS social media followings, followed by chart data, followed by awards, and ticket sales.

Social Media

According to Soundcharts, an online music analytics tool, BTS have around 286 million fans globally.⁷² To put that into perspective, Soundcharts logs the Jonas Brothers's (arguably the most popular contemporary American boyband) total fans at 44.8 million. One Direction, which is said to be the last majorly popular British boyband with international success before BTS was last logged as having a fan base of 162 million (though the group disbanded in January 2016). The Beatles's last recorded fan base is 78.9 million. And lastly, BLACKPINK, currently the top K-pop female group, has 197 million fans. With 286 million recorded fans, BTS tops all of these.⁷³

As far as U.S. specific numbers are concerned, BTS's large following can in part be understood by looking at fan groups on social media exclusively dedicated to U.S. BTS fans. Groups like these exist on seemingly every major platform popular in the West from Twitter with 737,000+ followers, Tiktok with 61,000+ followers, Facebook with 48,000+ followers, Instagram with 15,000+ followers, and YouTube with 13,000+ followers.⁷⁴ Again, these numbers are only representative of U.S. specific fan pages. Official BTS pages that are not limited to a specified U.S. audience have exponentially higher numbers. For example, BTS's official Twitter page, which is not exclusive to its U.S. fans, has over 38 million followers, which is exponentially larger than its U.S. based page with 737,000 fans.⁷⁵ The Jonas Brothers, in comparison, have a following of 4.7 million on their official Twitter account, whereas BTS

72. This data is based on synthesizes followers from eight of the most popular music and social media platforms: Deezer, Facebook, Instagram, Line Music, Spotify, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube.

73. It is important to note that these numbers are based on a synthesis of followers across social media as well as current streaming trends and that these numbers can fluctuate regularly. Also, these numbers are not based on all time fans but rather current fans. The information is also based on worldwide data and not just data that considers the U.S.

74. BTS U.S. Social Media accounts as of April 2022: Twitter, <https://twitter.com/USBTSA.R.M.Y.>; TikTok, https://www.tiktok.com/@usbtsA.R.M.Y._; Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/USBTSA.R.M.Y./>; Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/usbtsA.R.M.Y./>; YouTube, <https://www.YouTube.com/c/USBTSA.R.M.Y.>

75. BTS official Twitter account: https://twitter.com/bts_bighit.

have 38 million; however, it should be taken into consideration that BTS and its A.R.M.Y. have specifically strategized its social media presence as a way of boosting its fan base, while this might not be the case with Jonas Brothers. Enormous followings on U.S. specific social media accounts are just one way that demonstrates BTS’s huge popularity in the U.S.

Music Charts

In addition to social media followers, we can look at BTS achievements in the U.S. music industry, largely demonstrated through U.S. music charts and awards, in order to understand the scope of the band’s popularity with Americans. Since the Billboard Hot 100 is the music industry standard record chart in the U.S. and its chart rankings are based on sales (physical and digital), radio play, and online streaming in the U.S., this is an important consideration in understanding BTS’s popularity in the U.S. Most notably, on the Billboard Hot 100, BTS has achieved six No. 1 hits, nine Top 10 hits, and twenty–three songs to chart in total. BTS’s all English hit, “Dynamite,” even broke a Guinness world record (just one of many) on Billboard’s digital song sales chart for most weeks at No.1.⁷⁶ In addition, on the Billboard 200, BTS achieved five No. 1 Hits, six Top 10 hits, and fourteen songs to chart in total. They also held the number one artist spot on the Artist 100 for an impressive total of twenty weeks. MRC Data’s year end U.S. report for 2021 featured an entire page highlighting significant growth in “world music” consumption (17.4% rise) and states that this is largely thanks to a number of K–pop successes including BTS’s three Hot 100 chart topping hits.⁷⁷ Notably, “Butter” was the no. 13 most consumed song in the U.S. in 2021 with sales and streams combined. These incredible BTS U.S. successes are helpfully visualized in the following chart:

BTS U.S. Achievement	Chart/ Data Source
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76. Gil Kaufman, “BTS Officially Members of 2022 Guinness World Records Hall of Fame,” Billboard, September 3, 2021, <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/bts-2022-guinness-world-records-hall-of-fame-9624353/>.

77. MRC Data Reports, “Year–End Report U.S. 2021,” Accessed April 25, 2022, https://mrcdatareports.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/MRC_YEAREND_2021_US_FNL.pdf.

6 No. 1 Hits	Billboard Hot 100
9 Top Ten Hits	Billboard Hot 100
Most Weeks at No. 1 on Billboard	Guinness World Record
5 No. 1 Hits	Billboard 200
6 Top 10 Hits	Billboard 200
No. 1 Artist for 20 Weeks	Billboard Artist 100
No. 13 Most Consumed Song in U.S. in 2021 ("Butter")	MRC Data/ Billboard

Figure 4: A table summarizing a selection of BTS's notable U.S. achievements.

Again, since all of this data is a synthesis of U.S. specific streams and music sales, etc. it provides definitive evidence that BTS is popular in the U.S.

Awards

Beyond having a huge social media following in the U.S. and having racked up an impressive feat of Billboard hits in a relatively short amount of time, BTS has also won an incredible amount of prestigious U.S. music awards. While BTS has won numerous awards at awards shows internationally, I list here the awards that best showcase an American fan base as opposed to worldwide. At the American Music Awards between 2018–2021 BTS won the following awards: Favorite Social Artist (2018, 2019, 2020), Favorite Duo or Group Pop/Rock (2019, 2020, 2021), Tour of the Year (2019), Artist of the Year (2021), and Favorite Pop Song with “Butter” (2021). At the Billboard Music Awards between 2017–2021 BTS won the following awards: Top Social Artist (2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021), Top Duo/Group (2019, 2020), Top Selling Song with “Dynamite” (2021), and Top Song Sales Artist (2021). BTS has not yet won a Grammy but their song “Dynamite” was nominated in 2020 and “Butter” is in the running for the 64th Awards show. BTS also won several recognitions at the Teen Choice Awards (which are given based on voters living in the U.S. aged thirteen and over) between the years 2017–2019.

Ticket Sales

Having now looked at BTS's fan base according to its social media following, music charts and awards I examine ticket sales as the last piece of measuring BTS's popularity in the U.S. A detailed article by Forbes in December 2021 disclosed that BTS headlined four nights of performances as a part of their "Permission to Dance" concert series at LA SoFi Stadium, racking up \$33 million in sales and 214,000 tickets being sold.⁷⁸ This shattered long-standing records, making the event second in most ticket grosses for a single concert event in U.S. history, Billboard Music notes.⁷⁹ Fans in attendance were both from the U.S. and internationals who flew in for the event. As the specific demographics of ticket sales for this and other similar events are not available to the public it is impossible to know what percentage of those in attendance were of Asian descent, however it is interesting to consider that nearly half of the U.S. Asian American population resides in the West and many of them are concentrated in California. This could be related to the fact that BTS ticket sales have been so high in California specifically. However, BTS has sold out concerts in several cities outside of L.A. Prior to the COVID shutdown BTS ran a successful global tour called BTS world Tour Love Yourself: Speak Yourself which sold 1.05 million tickets in 23 shows across North and South America, Europe, and Asia. The L.A. stop at Pasadena's Rose bowl grossed \$16.7 million and sold 113,000 tickets. This was a two-to-one improvement over BTS's last arena shows, Billboard notes.⁸⁰ On this same tour BTS performed shows in Chicago and New York where they out-earned most of their contemporaries in each market. The Billboard article charting this

78. Hugh McIntyre, "BTS Scores The Second-Biggest Ticket Grosses For A Single Concert Event In U.S. History," *Forbes*, December 3, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hughmcintyre/2021/12/03/bts-scores-the-second-biggest-ticket-grosses-for-a-single-concert-event-in-us-history/?sh=7a9f1e80787c>.

79. Eric Frankenberg, "BTS Scores the Biggest Boxscore in Almost a Decade, Thanks to Four Nights at SoFi Stadium," *Billboard*, December 3, 2021, https://www.billboard.com/music/chart-beat/bts-boxscore-sofi-stadium-1235005581/#recipient_hashed=fa14c2f4e8a8349e2e38f6c30cdcaf84fe26a7b4646f9878867b1f7fe198b726

80. *Ibid.*

data made the speculation that “[BTS’s] wide-ranging success – on top of a growing roster of familiar global hits – could swing the doors open even further for international acts.”⁸¹

The data we have seen across social media, charts, awards, and ticket sales shows that a large portion of BTS fans across the globe are English-speaking females between the ages of 18–24 living in Indonesia. However, BTS’s popularity has exploded in the U.S. and continues to grow. BTS ticket sales have been concentrated in L.A., New York, and Chicago – areas with a large population of Asian-Americans – and so it is possible that a large number of these fans are of Asian descent; making identity a potentially huge factor that (at least initially) affected BTS’s popularity in the U.S. On the other hand, data also shows that BTS fans span the U.S. continent and interviews, surveys, and social media fan pages have made it clear that U.S. BTS fans are made up of diverse ethnicities, ages, and genders. Very helpfully, the *New York Times*⁸² printed an article with the following chart showing BTS fans across the U.S. in 2017 based on data from YouTube and Billboard. This visual representation is demonstrated in Figure 5. Another telling article by Time interviewed BTS fans to show that the group is not a monolith but made up of fans of varied cultures and ages. The article stated:

*Much has been said about A.R.M.Y.: their online campaigns to support BTS’s music, their translation work, their philanthropic efforts. But perhaps less has been said about A.R.M.Y.’s diversity, though anyone who is a part of the community knows it’s one of the fandom’s best qualities. In the general public’s eyes, A.R.M.Y. is often flattened into a stereotype of teen girls, whose musical tastes have for decades been unfairly looked upon with derision despite the clout they hold as consumers and taste-makers. (Case in point: James Corden’s foot-in-mouth moment when referring to A.R.M.Y. on his show as “15-year-old girls.”) And while teen girls certainly do make up a sizable portion of BTS’s fan base, its demographics are in fact much more varied, diverse in age, gender, race, ethnicity, geography and more...*⁸³

81. Ibid.

82. Josh Katz, “What Music Do Americans Love the Most? 50 Detailed Fan Maps,” *The New York Times*, August 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/07/upshot/music-fandom-maps.html#>.

83. Kat Moon, “These Portraits Show That the BTS A.R.M.Y. Is Not a Monolith,” *Time*, November 24, 2021, <https://time.com/6122609/bts-A.R.M.Y.-photos/>.

BTS's success with number one hits on U.S. based music charts like Billboard 100 have doubtless helped to gain attention from the band from an array of audiences from different backgrounds. Despite breaking records in the U.S. that put the band in a similar category as the Beatles, it is also still evident that there are a large number of people in the U.S. who know very little about the band. Why might this be? One possible answer is that the largest portion of the current BTS fan base is of Asian descent and Asian Americans only make up about 7% of the U.S. population,⁸⁴ thus potentially making BTS and the wider K-culture interest appeal widely but only within a niche section of the entire U.S. population.

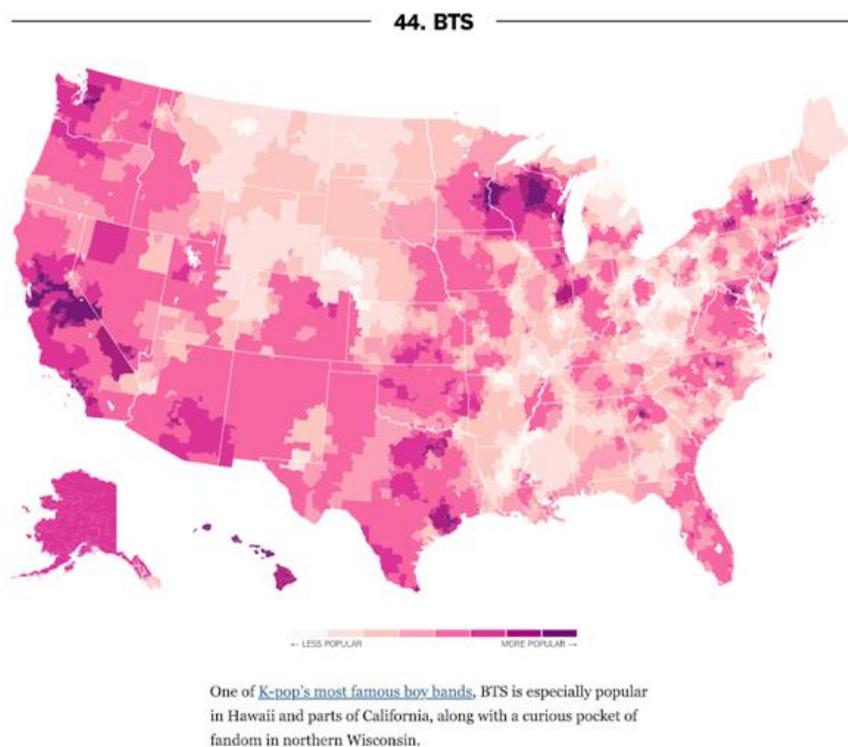


Figure 5: A map depicting the geographical location of BTS fans in the U.S.

Again, this is only speculation. It is also possible that the advantage of having a fan base so interconnected with the digital realm has been largely the cause of BTS's rise on the charts which

84. Abby Budiman and Neil G. Ruiz, "Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population," Pew Research Center, April 29, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-americans/#:~:text=Asians%20now%20make%20up%20about,reported%20as%20a%20single%20group.>

oftentimes take streaming into account – and the BTS A.R.M.Y. is known for its tactics, one of which is called “total attack,” where the fan group rallies to collectively stream BTS media for hours and even days on end in order to help boost the artists up the charts. Whatever the causes that have enabled BTS to rise to its current pedestal in the U.S., the momentum is likely to continue building and at this rate could potentially reach the point where they finally become a U.S. household name. This will certainly be the case if A.R.M.Y. has any say in the matter, and as we have seen, their power seems to know no bounds.

Conclusion:

Why [is BTS] popular? Why now? What does it mean?

I have now thoroughly explored the rise of BTS as a part of the Korean Wave and the band’s explosive (and at first puzzling) popularity in the U.S. This was discussed in four sections: 1) Unraveling the Popularity of BTS in the U.S. 2) Defining K–Culture and Authenticity in the Music of BTS 3) Analyzing the Cultural Properties Exemplified in BTS’s “IDOL.” And 4) Investigating the Demographics of BTS fans in the U.S. through Digital Ethnographic Research.

I first looked at the current status of the Korean Wave in the U.S. where I introduced BTS and its fan base, A.R.M.Y., discussing connected issues such as identity as it relates to the greater Asian American culture as well as other minority or underrepresented groups in addition to majority groups (i.e. Non–Asian Americans). Here I introduced how BTS and their fans are paving the way a more inclusive multicultural American society. Next, I explored the origins and definitions of the Korean wave and the connected ideas to K–pop and issues of authenticity, homogeneity, and Western cultural dominance. Here I discussed how K–pop and the music of BTS in particular is not simply a Koreannized version of Western pop but an authentic Korean cultural entity that has the power to positively influence its audiences and broaden interest and respect for other cultures. In the third section as a continuation of point two I analyzed the visual, lyrical, and musical aspects of BTS’s “IDOL,” providing a clear example of how K–pop and BTS are not only authentically South Korean but encompass a kind of pop music that is capable of carrying weighted layers of cultural and social meaning. In the final point I provided the results of my digital ethnographic investigation of BTS’s fans to demonstrate the diversity and wide–

reaching scope of BTS's fans, indicating that there is a growing interest the music of BTS which is paving the way for the rise of other international artists in the mainstream U.S. This trend furthermore predicts an evolving future where perceptions of cultural diversity will continue to develop in a positive direction and where differences are celebrated rather than discriminated against in the U.S. and elsewhere around the globe. It also indicates that the music industry is moving toward a future that is less Western dominant and more inclusive of more a diverse range of artists.

In my conclusion I now return to some key questions posed at the beginning of this paper. In the book *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*, Youna Kim posed the following questions in regard to the emergence of the Korean Wave: Why popular? Why now? What does it mean socially, culturally, and politically in a global context? My research has sought to answer the same questions but on a more specific scale in regard to the K-pop boyband BTS and their popularity not just in the global context but specifically in the U.S. This specific topic is an important one which until this paper appears to be missing from the greater Korean Wave discourse. As I returned from a five-year period living in South Korea and became aware for the first time of what appeared to be a growing fascination among Americans over all things Korean, and a trending rage over the boyband BTS in particular, I could not help but wonder about the same questions Kim was asking. Why was BTS popular? Why now? And what did it all mean, especially in the social, cultural, and political contexts? Based on my research, these are the conclusions I have drawn.

First, I offer my response to the interconnected questions, *Why popular and why now?* BTS's popularity in the U.S. is a continuation of the Korean Wave which has been ongoing since the 1990s. Many factors contributed to this sudden intrigue in Korean culture and its spread across the globe including historical and cultural context, timing, finances, targeted marketing, and more. BTS, debuting in 2013 (with its first U.S. appearance in 2014), entered the U.S. music scene at a time when there was already stirring intrigue in Korean culture likely brought on by the preceding spread of Korean cultural products and K-dramas in particular. 2012, the year before BTS's South Korean debut, was also the year that Psy's Gangnam style went viral on YouTube and heightened K-pop's visibility in mainstream

America, potentially sparking intrigue about not only South Korean popular music but South Korea itself. Platforms like YouTube and an increased digital interconnectedness in the world have also contributed to changed perspectives and opportunities for increased interactions across cultures. Research from Pew provides evidence for changing cultural perspectives which is especially strong in younger generations (again, a group that is closely connected to other cultures through digital interaction). The Pew research indicated the following:

Across Europe, North America and Australia, there is a strong consensus that diversity has increased in their countries . . . in the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Australia, and Spain, roughly six-in-ten say they are in favor of more diversity. . . . There are divides, however, within countries across a variety of demographic and political groups. In Europe, North America and Australia, people who are more in favor of diversity tend to be younger, have more education and place themselves on the left end of the political spectrum.”⁸⁵

Based on this data, positive perceptions of cultural diversity in the West are on the rise, especially with the up-and-coming generations, and this is important as these generations will ultimately become some of the world’s future leaders who will possess the power to make political and cultural change.

Aside from influencing cultural perceptions in society, digital interconnectedness has also been revolutionizing the music industry, connecting fans with artists and providing new modes of music streaming and along with this, ways of tracing and measuring the popularity of musical groups. Another likely reason for BTS’s initial popularity is the fact that Asian Americans in the U.S. were eager for the opportunity to see a band that in many ways represents minority groups rise to the top. Many young BTS fans have regularly expressed in interviews their encouragement in seeing someone like themselves thriving and making an impact in huge ways in a society where they themselves have experienced discrimination in one form or another. This in turn has likely added to the “fire” of BTS fans that has

85. Jacob Poushter and Janell Fetterolf, “A Changing World: Global Views on Diversity, Gender Equality, Family Life and the Importance of Religion,” Pew Research Center, April 22, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/04/22/a-changing-world-global-views-on-diversity-gender-equality-family-life-and-the-importance-of-religion/>.

often propelled them to not only support BTS but help the band become more widely known in the U.S. Lastly, it is clear that as the world becomes more and more globalized there is an increased awareness for the need to improve on issues of inclusiveness and race. These matters seem to be understood and supported especially well by younger tech-savvy generations who grew up with the digital realm being a nearly inseparable part of their reality. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that BTS and their fans who are largely made up of this younger generation have been passionately and effectively paving the way for the future of music, and along with it the impact it can make.

This leads us into the final unanswered question: *What does it all mean?* Or in other words, *What is the extent and significance of BTS's influence and growing popularity in the U.S.?* The fact that BTS, a primarily non-English-speaking, non-Western, musical group has been able to rise to the level of success as it has in the U.S. is significant and, in many ways, unprecedented for such a group. Beyond this it provides clues as to the direction of future societies and their related cultural issues are headed. BTS have often been compared with the Beatles in reaction to popularity with their fans as well as their many record-breaking achievements in music sales.⁸⁶ So far the band has broken twenty-three Guinness world records⁸⁷ with some of the most notable being: most viewed YouTube video in 24 hours by a K-pop group, fastest time to reach one million followers on TikTok, most tickets sold for a livestreamed concert, and most viewed YouTube video in twenty four hours (“Butter”). BTS has a long list of significant “firsts” with the most notable (arguably) of them being that they were the first Asian act to be awarded “Artist of the Year” at the American Music Awards (2021). Additionally, BTS’s track “Life Goes On” was the first (primarily) Korean song to debut at No. 1 on the Billboard’s Hot 100,

86. News 18, “Paul McCartney Says BTS' Fame Reminds Him of The Beatles,” November 25, 2020, <https://www.news18.com/news/movies/paul-mccartney-says-bts-fame-reminds-him-of-the-beatles-3114518.html>.

87. Eleonora Pilastro, “BTS and their 23 records enter the Guinness World Records 2022 Hall of Fame,” Guinness World Records, September 2, 2021, <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2021/9/bts-and-their-23-records-enter-the-guinness-world-records-2022-hall-of-fame>.

demonstrating that the music industry is becoming more susceptible to diversity.⁸⁸ Billboard Music chart topping successes, reliable data sources (such as Nielsen in conglomeration with MRC Data and Billboard), hordes of social media followers, as well as awards and nominations from prestigious music organizations such as the American Music Awards and Grammys are indicative of the South Korean band's explosive popularity in the U.S. over the past five years.

With this level of popularity BTS has been endowed with an incredible amount of social influence by which they have repeatedly encouraged and inspired their millions of international fans. BTS and A.R.M.Y. have been active in philanthropic work with projects like their partnership with UNICEF to end violence against children, donations to educational causes, stands against racism in support of Black Lives Matter, foodbank drives, support of climate preservation and poverty issue efforts, speaking out against anti-Asian attacks, encouraging perseverance amidst the Covid-19 pandemic at the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly, donations to cancer hospitals, supporting disaster victims, and more.⁸⁹ Because of their huge impact, BTS has even been recognized by the current South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, as "special presidential envoy for future generations and culture."⁹⁰ Beyond these huge causes, in which BTS's fans have taken an active and significant part, BTS has, more than anything else, always emphasized to their fans this important message: that they should love and be true to

88. Rania Aniftos, "BTS' A.R.M.Y. Celebrate How 'Music Transcends Language' After 'Life Goes On' Tops Hot 100," *Billboard*, November 30, 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/bts-A.R.M.Y.-reacts-life-goes-on-hot-100-9491469/>

89. Jaxx Artz, "7 Ways BTS Inspires the World to Create Lasting Change," *Global Citizen*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/bts-takes-action-global-citizen-live/>; Daniel J. Cho, "BTS' Most Generous Moments: From Million-Dollar Donations to Sharing Acts of Kindness," *People*, November 13, 2021, <https://people.com/music/bts-most-generous-moments/?slide=9e9dde54-2004-412a-b13f-b887bbc559#9e9dde54-2004-412a-b13f-b887bbc559>.

90. Young Oh Chae and Shihoo Lee, "South Korean President appoints BTS as special envoys before their visit to the UN," *ABC News*, September 14, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/south-korean-president-appoints-bts-special-envoys-visit/story?id=80006773#:~:text=SEOUL%20%2D%20K%20pop%20group,diplomatic%20passports%20and%20fountain%20pens>.

themselves. This comes out in many of their lyrics such as those for the song “Answer: Love Myself,” the opening lines to which are translated as:

I'm opening my eyes in the darkness / When my heartbeat sounds unfamiliar / I'm looking at you in the mirror / The fear-ridden eyes, asking the question . . . Loving myself might be harder / Than loving someone else, let's admit it / The standards you made are more strict for yourself / The thick tree rings in your life / It's part of you, it's you / Now let's forgive ourselves / Our lives are long, trust yourself when in a maze / When winter passes, spring always comes.⁹¹

In the first quarter of a 21st century world that is still healing from a global pandemic and a period that has been riddled with racial and political unrest it is easy to see how messages like these have resonated with the individuals who hear them whether they have suffered loss, discrimination, violence, depression, or self-doubt. The members and music of BTS have served as encouraging role models, cultural ambassadors, and powerful musical force not only for young people but for a fan base that is more than a group of fans but a community that welcomes people of all ages and nationalities. Nowhere is BTS's desire for global and racial unity more apparent than in the band's recent collaboration with Coldplay in the release of their music video “My Universe,” which offers unifying messages on multiple levels and paints a beautiful picture of the future so many hope for.⁹² For BTS fans, whether inside or outside the U.S., the rise of BTS is the rise of a hope-filled future, reminding its audience that no matter who we are or what sort of crazy world we are living in, “we don't need permission to dance.” BTS, as cultural ambassadors and positive icons in popular culture, are spreading critical reminders to love others as well as ourselves at a moment in history that has been riddled with racial turbulence, anxiety, and global health crises. This young band of South Korean musicians with beautiful dreams that rival a night sky canopy of shining stars have broken into the mainstream U.S., shattering barriers and providing exactly the kind of

91. BTS, “Answer: Love Myself,” May 18, 2018, Translated by Lyric Genius, <https://genius.com/Genius-english-translations-bts-answer-love-myself-english-translation-lyrics>.

92. Coldplay and BTS, “My Universe,” music video, September 30, 2021, https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=3YqPKLZF_WU.

positive messages that the Western U.S. and much of the world could greatly benefit from at a time like this, if only we know to look up.

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