Identifying the Factors Leading to the Globalization of K-Pop

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Abstract. This thesis provides a comprehensive analysis of the growing popularity of Korean pop music (K-pop) worldwide in recent years and explores how entertainment companies have employed techniques to influence the global music market through K-pop. These will be useful in comprehending the current state of K-pop globalization and the variables that contribute to globalization. Firstly, the general description and introduction of K-pop. Then the content analysis is used to analyze the factors for K-pop's globalization, including the uniqueness of melody and dance, the commercial cultivation of artists, and the use of social media for marketing and promotion. Through the thesis, it is possible to learn that the success of K-pop is not accidental, but rather the result of internal strategy's ability to anticipate and capitalize on opportunities in the external environment.

Keywords: Korean pop music · K-pop · Global popularity

1   Introduction

In the last decade, K-pop has emerged worldwide and its popularity continues to expand beyond Asia.

On July 15, 2012, the music video for "Gangnam Style" was released on the YouTube platform. It was first the video in Internet history to be viewed more than a billion times. In the same year, it also got the Guinness World Record as "Most liked video in YouTube history". In addition, the horse-riding dance of "Gangnam Style" was also a craze for fans and artists from different countries to cover [1].

In 2013 and 2014, Super Junior held a world tour, "Super Show 5". This tour started in Seoul on March 2013, and lasted for 11 months. During the period, 28 concerts were held in 20 cities in Asia, Europe, and South America, and that was the first time a Korean singer held concerts in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Peru [2].

In 2016, BigBang came in second place in Time Magazine's "World's Top 100 Most Influential People".

In 2017, BTS won the "Top Social Artist", that the first K-pop Group to win a Billboard Music Awards [3]. Since then, BTS has been included in the list of winners yearly. And as of 2022, BTS has accumulated a total of 12 awards in Billboard Music Awards that successfully surpassed Destiny's Child to become the most awarded global group in the history of Billboard Music Awards.

The growing globalization of K-pop has had a prominent impact on the mutual enrichment between Eastern and Western cultures, thus drawing the attention of researchers and scholars. However, because K-pop is a relatively new topic of study, there are unfilled gaps in the existing iterature that merit additional investigation.

The goal of this thesis is to provide a thorough and methodical examination of the emergence of K-pop's international popularity. On the one side, K-pop's success can be attributed to the development and execution of effective strategic planning by entertainment companies. On the other side, the rise of social media has provided K-pop with a plethora of options to broaden its global reach. The goal is to examine how the external environment and internal strategies interact to drive the globalspread of K-pop.

This thesis analyzed the data by collecting various K-pop literature (including relevant reports and journal articles from Korea, China, Japan, and the U.S. region) and utilizing documentary analysis to comprehend the causes for K-pop's emergence and investigate the aspects that contributed to its success.

Korean pop culture has grown in popularity in many parts of the world in recent years, attracting widespread international attention. Scholars and researchers have been interested in the globalization of K-pop. In response to the increasing globalization of K-pop, existing research has focused on a variety of factors, including systematic idol training systems, the creation of unique music and dance, and the active use of social media.

Much of the research emphasizes the importance of entertainment firms in K-pop's globalization. Keith Howard distinguishes between agencies that recruit and train singers, as well as the production companies that manage key assets like songwriters and lyricists, and promotional firms that use social media to build fan communities [4]. John Seabrook focuses on SM Entertainment, Korea's largest entertainment agency, and its "cultural technology", which is a system for mass-producing idols [5]. The entertainment companies have complete influence over the idols' appearance and performance. Although the current literature provides valuable insights into the globalization of K-pop, it has some limitations, focusing solely on internal factors.

The thesis in this dissertation intends to fill the gap in the existing literature by elucidating significance issues not addressed in current research and contribute to understanding the globalization of K-pop and the factors that contribute to globalization.

2 The Overview of Korean Wave and K-Pop

2.1 What is K-Pop

K-pop (Korean pop music) is a type of popular music that originated in Korea and is now considered a part of Korean culture. On top of its traditional Korean musical roots, it incorporates forms and genres from across the world, including as pop, hip-hop, R&B, experimental, rock, jazz, gospel, reggae, electronic dance music, folk, country, disco, and classical music.

2.2 Development of Korean Wave and K-Pop

The Korean Wave as a popular trend in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, and other countries and regions since the late 1990s, especially among teenagers, to enjoy or

consume Korean songs, dramas, movies, fashion, and travel. And the Korean Wave can be roughly divided into the following three stages (Refer to Table 1) [6].

The period from 1997 to the early 2000s was the first time that the name Korean Wave appeared and spread to overseas consumers during the first phase of the Korean Wave.

The Korean culture spread through the drama "What is Love" at that time had a fresh impact and aspirational effect on the Chinese audience because of its free-living environment and expression that was not available in China. That is not only for dramas but also for songs and dance music. In terms of music, although the first album of Fire Truck released in 1987 was well received in Japan, it is not enough to call it a Korean wave.

In the late 1990s, Korean music, centered on dance music, became popular in China and Taiwan, following the popularity of TV dramas.

The famous group H.O.T. performed in Beijing in February 2020, that was the first time Chinese media used the term "Korean Wave". Since then, Korean singers' concerts have attracted many teenagers, and many radio programs introducing Korean music have appeared. This was the cause of a Korean music agency established in the 1990s, and this social change officially led to K-Pop's expansion into the global market. More so, NRG began to lead the K-POP craze in Southeast Asia, including China, through Face book. Then the second generation of idols such as SHINHWA and TOHOSHINKI continued to form fan groups in China, which began to expand the awareness of Korean popular music centered in Asia.

The early 2000s to the mid-2000s was the second phase of the Korean Wave, a period when Korean dramas began to spread more and more.

Korean dramas and songs grew in popularity in Southeast Asia and China during 2002 and 2003. In addition, the Korean drama "Winter Sonata" became a blockbuster in Japan, extending the Korean Wave phenomenon [7]. Following the success of "Winter Sonata", "Great Jang-Geum" became popular, which allowing the Korean Wave to spread worldwide. Furthermore, not only have Korean dramas expanded, but so has Korean culinary globalization and the brilliance of Korean clothing, and an exceptional cultural product has functioned as a diplomatic ambassador.

The second phase of the Korean wave's development can be described as the heyday of dramas. Other content such as music was also developed. BoA ranked number one in the Japanese Oricon charts several times, followed by TOHOSHINKI in Japan, China, and other countries, and Rain became a world-class star through overseas performances. From then on, the abbreviation of Korean Pop, K-pop, meant the use of Korean popular culture in the domestic and international media.

Since the mid-2000s, K-pop began to spread outside of Asia as video sites such as YouTube became common, and the Korean Wave became a worldwide craze. With idols such as Oriental Gods, BigBang, Girls' Generation, T-ARA, Wonder Girls, SuperJunior, SHINee, EXO, and BTS as the center, the influence and concept of K-pop is rapidly expanding among the 10–20 generation of all young people over the world.

Table 1. The History of Korean Wave

	Korean Wave 1.0	Korean Wave 2.0	Korean Wave 3.0
Keywords	Emergence of Korean wave	Deepening of Korean wave	Diversification of Korean wave
Time Periods	1997 to 2000	Early 2000s to the mid-2000s	After the mid-2000s
Main areas	TV series, music	TV series, music, movies, games	TV series, music, movies, games, cartoons, Korean food
Mainstream region	China, Taiwan, Vietnam	China, Taiwan, Japan, Southeast Asia	China, Taiwan, Japan, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Africa, America
Representative content	H.O.T., What is Love	Winter Sonata, Great Jang-Geum	K-pop's idol

3   Analysis of the Reasons for K-Pop's Successful Globalization

3.1   The Uniqueness of Melody and Dance

The most prominent characteristic of Korean pop music is that people will remember the melody after hearing it once. Their producers have a habit of using a lot of plucked and lead sounds to make the hook parts of the songs very catchy and use a lot of simple and highly repetitive words to make them catchy, so even foreigners who don't speak Korean can hum them in no time, especially the fast-paced songs [8].

K-pop is very different from other countries' pop music in that it focuses on the dance moves, giving the audience a strong visual experience. Because of their long training, most singers have excellent dance skills and physical strength, so singing and dancing at the same time are not difficult for them. Their dances and songs are memorable, the same moves are repeated along with the songs to leave a profound impression.

For example, Super Junior's "SORRY SORRY" hand rub dance and PSY's "Gangnam Style" horse-riding dance. Especially for idol groups, their unified dance moves are more appealing to the audience. Therefore, young people who are interested in freshness and fast pace are easily attracted to K-pop's style. They also pay to learn specific MV dances and even form dance groups to participate in various cultural events or commercial performances, which also has an alternative publicity effect.

The combination of K-pop music and dance makes K-pop aurally and visually appealing to the public, which is one of the reasons for its success.

3.2   Commercialization and Cultivaton of Artists

3.2.1   Selection of Artists

K-pop starts with talent scouting, in other words recruiting the right talent is an important entity that ultimately determines the success of the K-pop business. Korean entertainment

agencies take a fairly open attitude towards the sourcing of trainee talent, they hold regular auditions and conduct global recruitment so that they can both recruit a wide range of talent and expand into foreign markets.

For example, SM Entertainment holds large-scale auditions yearly, not only in Korea but also in the U.S., China, and Japan. And there are online auditions, where people from all over the world can submit to their company [9].

In addition, the phenomenon of globalization of artists can be seen through the current popular groups. For example, TWICE has 5 Korean members, 3 Japanese members, and 1 member from Taiwan. GOT7 has 4 members from Korea and 1 member each from Hong Kong, Thailand, and the United States. While NCT has 23 members, they are from Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, Japan, the United States, Canada, and Thailand.

3.2.2   Training of Artists

After getting highly qualified candidates in the door, the next step is the specialized training and grooming of the talent to bring out the maximum potential of the person, which is also known as the trainee system.

In addition to regular schoolwork, the practice cycle lasts between 3 and 5 years and includes a full range of advanced training in singing, dancing, acting, foreign languages, etiquette, and self-management.

It's crucial to remember that K-pop idols aren't only amazing singers; they also act in dramas and films and display their wit as hosts on variety shows and radio shows.

At the same time, there is a cruel elimination mechanism that constantly sifts people to ensure that resources are tilted towards the few best trainees, and by adopting a promotion test, the trainees' competitive drive is stimulated to maximize the training effect. This trainee model provides the Korean culture and entertainment industry with high quality, high success rate, and efficient guarantee of cultural and artistic talents.

3.2.3   Planning and Packaging of Artists

Through long-term training, the company can effectively evaluate all trainees, gain clear insight into each individual's abilities, skills and potential, and plan for a comprehensive package.

Rather than performing as single singers, K-pop performers usually perform as groups. Because supporters' likes and preferences vary, the larger a group's membership, the better equipped it is to accommodate the demands of fans. In other words, from a vast group of boys and girls, fans can find at least one that they prefer.

Entertainment companies measure each member based on their abilities, skills, appearance, and personality, and allow members to play different roles in the group, appealing to different groups of consumers by exercising their talents and showing charisma in their respective fields.

These iconic roles are usually featured in a K-pop group:

"Visions", the absolutely beautiful people in the group, usually appear on album covers or in the center of music videos. They are the obvious choice to endorse merchandise, as they are considered the most recognizable faces to bring public attention to the group.

"Vocal", members with extraordinary vocal ability, whose voices are most prominent and recognizable in performances. They are frequently in charge of solos and vocally hard parts of the songs, such as high notes.

"Main Dancer" is the person with the strongest dance skills. They are responsible for music videos and stage leads, and sometimes solo parts.

The individual with the best rap skills, who gets the majority of the rap parts, is referred to as the "Main Rapper".

"Mangnae" is the group's youngest member, usually as sweet and naive as a child.

"Leaders", as the name implies, they have abilities to unite the group and take care of others, sometimes as the oldest member.

In addition to the diversity of roles, another characteristic of group combinations is their flexibility. When a large K-pop group, especially when they reach enough success and recognition, it is possible to split off a smaller group, usually one-third of the original group size, among the existing members. Smaller splits are created primarily to respond to different language markets. In the case of WayV, the small team of NCT, which includes 3 Chinese members, 1 Hong Kong member, 1 Macao member, 1 Taiwan member, and 1 Thai-Chinese member, successfully debuted in China in 2019. In addition, the company will decide whether to produce solo albums for members with strengths within the group based on their existing achievements.

Finally, working in a group reduces commercial risk. Due to large investments and unpredictable changes in consumer tastes, the music industry has become a high-risk business. Throughout their careers, all artists experience ups and downs. More emphasis on collectivization in K-pop would reduce reliance on a single artist.

When member are sick or embroiled in a controversy, they may not perform properly. If consumers feel that a K-pop artist is not meet their expectations, then consumers may decide to stop buying the product.

However, not all members' reputations will deteriorate at the same time. As a result of variety, K-pop groups are able to maintain a more consistent performance despite changing circumstances. Groups can continue to perform even if one or a few members are absent. In Korea, all male citizens between the ages of 20 and 30 are required to serve in the military for a minimum of 21 months. While some members serve in the military, the remaining members can continue to maintain the group's popularity.

3.3 Using Social Media for Marketing and Promotion

Over the past decade, social media has gradually become a necessity of life because of the advancement of technology. It allows people around the world to interact, share, discuss, and even deliver music in the same space.

Entertainment companies can use social media to promote a series of events, such as music stages, variety shows, films, and public service activities. So that artists can enter the public eye and form a positive interaction with the public, and eventually achieve the effect of becoming popular [10, 11].

In Korea, artists often use social media, such as Instagram, V Live, YouTube, and Twitter to engage with fans, by communicating music philosophy and training process or sharing daily lives, allowing fans to form a sense of closeness with the artists like family or friends.

Among Korean idol groups, BTS is one of the leaders in the use of social media. The members of BTS would maintain a daily Twitter post when they were trainees. And also upload videos on YouTube to show their fans how they train and share moods and creative ideas. Unlike traditional media like television, the emergence of global online video platforms like YouTube has allowed media content to flow across boundaries, allowing music to reach a larger audience than ever before. As a result of their use of social media, BTS has gained a large international fans outside of Korea.

However, when an artist makes a small mistake, that can spread quickly on social media, which can be very damaging to the artist's reputation. The difficulty and cost of controlling reputation are high, so entertainment companies prefer to sign restrictive treaties to bind their artists and reduce the business risks caused by human factors. For example, a no-relationship treaty prohibits artists from falling in love within five years of their debut. This is because an artist falling in love would shatter the fantasy of the ideal boyfriend or girlfriend in the minds of fans. K-pop not only sells music, but also a consistent and distinct brand, as well as the artist's image and reputation.

4   Conclusion

This thesis provides a thorough and systematic examination of the factors that have contributed to K-increasing pop's popularity and global distribution in recent years. It includes the impact of the external environment and changes in the internal strategies of entertainment companies.

Because of technology advancements, the world has been increasingly connected over the last decade, due to the introduction of social media and digital distribution. Unlike traditional media like television and radio, the rise of global online video platforms such as YouTube has allowed for the cross-border flow of media content, allowing music to reach the largest audience ever. The rise of social media has the potential to empower consumers, who now have more power than ever before. In contrast to traditional top-down distribution, new media enables a consumer-driven bottom-up flow of music content, as well as rapid sharing and debate of that content. In a socially networked world, despite the physical distance between persons throughout the world, the emotional connection between artists and viewers has become closer.

K-pop, which began as a niche, has taken advantage of these opportunities and taken the world by storm. To enable K-pop's global expansion, entertainment companies have strategically integrated their global strategies into all parts of the value chain, including talent acquisition and management, team building and content production, promotion, and maximizing potential global reach.

K-pop also emphasizes visual effects and melodies. It is committed to catchy melodies, jaw-dropping choreography, and visually appealing groups of boys and girls. Coupled with this, K-pop also mixes a variety of global pop sounds and musical styles and incorporates repetitive English lyrics, thus further reducing the language barrier.

The external environment interacts with internal organizational variables in the globalization of K-pop, which is self-evident.

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