

HALLYU 3.0: Production, Consumption, and Diaspora in K-pop

by

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INTRODUCTION: CONNECTION AND K-pop

I decided to study K-pop for my project, because I became a fan of the genre in 2016. Although I had no prior, personal connection to South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea) my father frequently travelled to Korea for business. He would often buy me souvenirs and one year he bought me a doll that was wearing a traditional Korean outfit. At the time I just thought it was a pretty doll and appreciated it as a gift, but I did not consider the cultural meaning behind the outfit. It was not until I started getting deeper into K-pop that I also started to learn more about Korean culture. After years of having that doll sitting on my shelf, I finally learned the significance of her traditional outfit. She is wearing an outfit called a *hanbok*. The literal translation of hanbok is “Korean clothing” (‘han’ referring to Korea and ‘bok’ meaning clothes) and it has come to mean a traditional outfits for men and women which are worn during certain occasions such as festivals, ceremonies, and holidays. I became interested in the Korean language and I found myself subtly picking up words and phrases from the music and some Korean programs. I started looking up words that I heard frequently, such as honorifics and the word for “I love you,” which is used in many K-pop songs.

Since starting this project and learning more about Korean culture and about how K-pop has become global, I have started to reflect on my connection with the genre on a more personal level and will discuss the topic of diaspora, which is an experience shared by many immigrants who have come to the U.S. I have had my own experience with diaspora. I was born in 1997, in Calcutta India and officially came to the U.S. as a three-year-old adoptee in the year 2000. As an Indian girl, I was adopted into a white family and raised in the Jewish faith. It took my parents three years to get the adoption finalized in India and during those few years many other issues arose here with them. One of those issues was the death of my grandfather for whom I was named. In the Jewish faith, it is common to give a child a name starting with the same letter as the relative who has passed. I supposed to be named Vivian after my mother’s aunt Violet. Since my grandfather Arthur passed just before the adoption was finalized, my name was changed to Anna and middle name became Vivian. I also attended Hebrew School once a week and when I was 13, I had a Bat Mitzvah and then continued my Jewish education into my junior year of high school when I became a confirmation along with the other students in the program. This story is significant because I am part of two minority groups, Asian and Jewish. The original definition of diaspora is associated with the Jewish people being exiled from their homeland of Israel.

While I do not have a strong connection to my Indian side my Jewish faith is extremely important to me. After the anti-Semitic riot that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia my mother and I travelled down there with the Union for Reform Judaism on a solidarity trip. Although I personally do not consider myself to be ‘actively’ Jewish I am proud of my religion and that is exactly what I said when I was asked to give my opinions on the situation during a dinner with the entire group. Since getting into the K-pop genre I have started to wonder if my fascination with the culture has to do with being an Asian American, and not having a strong connection to my Indian side while also having pride in seeing Asian content gain attention in western media.

Chapter One of this senior project will be a continuation of this introduction and focus on my personal story and how I discovered the genre of K-pop, and eventually became so intrigued by the culture that I decided to do a project on it. In Chapter Two, I will review substantive literature that examines the marketing, production, and consumption of the K-pop

industry. This chapter will also include literature that deals with the topic of diaspora, which is central to both the production and consumption of this global phenomenon. Chapter Three will be divided into two sections. The first half of the Chapter will be case studies about idols who represent diasporic ideals and cultural differences, as well as highlighting the trainee process. Then the second half of the Chapter will highlight the dark side of the K-pop industry such as mental health disorders, eating disorders, racism, and online hate. Chapter Four will be a concert analysis for the group Monsta X which I saw live in August 2019. In Chapter Five I will analyze music videos from different artists, each video representing an important part of the K-pop industry. In Chapter Six I conduct interviews with three K-pop fans that explore cultural differences, how they discovered the genre, and what they like and dislike about the fandom culture more generally. Finally, in the conclusion, I will summarize the importance of my project and reflect on what I have learned.

CHAPTER 1: MY STORY

In this chapter I will be reflecting on my own experience as a K-pop fan, how I got into this genre of music, as well as what it means to me now. I will also relay how it is an important topic for cultural analysis and academic study.

It all started in 2016, just a normal day scrolling through YouTube when I suddenly started getting unusual videos in my recommended section; this was not totally out of the ordinary though. As I had gotten into some of my favorite music and artists through YouTube, but this genre was extremely different and somewhat random or so I thought at first. I wondered how this music started popping up for me and what I had been watching that related too it, as that is usually how the YouTube algorithm seems to work. The last big genre of music I had gotten into before this was *rock/alternative* music, and that was in my junior year of high school, and I was still mostly listening to that genre when I started college. But this was a far stretch, and I mean an international stretch. I was being recommended Korean Pop music and was confused as to why, but I was also slightly intrigued. Why this music? I wondered why it started to pop up in YouTube recommendations. I did not know anything about Korea, or its culture so why was this music and content starting to appear?

I now understand that these K-pop videos began to appear on my feed due to the YouTube algorithm which uses various methods to recommend videos based on demographic and prior search history. My prior frequent searches had been entertainment related such as, music videos, reaction videos, or BuzzFeed videos which encompasses different genres of videos including K-pop related content. Being fascinated by spectacle, the colors, dance moves, music, and the overall potential to learn about another culture, made me finally decide to give the genre a chance. I have always loved music and popular culture and as a young kid some of my favorite memories revolves around me ‘dancing’ and listening to music. I used to come home from elementary school every day and hang out with my au pair in her bedroom in the attic. Our favorite activity was to watch TV, but since it was usually the afternoon and cartoons were usually not on, we would watch MTV, the channel that plays continuous music videos all day. In retrospect, my foray into K-pop might not have been such a far stretch after all.

At first, I hesitated to listen to the actual music and looked into other available content beforehand. I try to find out the basics of what I am interested in and explore other types of funny or relatable content that pertains to a genre of music, in order to understand more. If I enjoy this content, then I will move on to the music itself. Regarding K-pop, one of the first related videos I watched was not actually a song or music video at all. The first video I watched was by a YouTuber named Megan Bowen who is an African American woman living in Korea. She did an interview with the members of a male group called Topp Dogg, where she played a game with them in which they had to try to pronounce American names. The atmosphere of the videos seemed to be fun and lighthearted and was a great first exposure to the genre and to get to know the artists. She did two versions, one with male names and one with female names. In each video the ten members were divided into groups of two and they ‘competed’ with each other to see which team could get the most points. In each version, you see the members, going through the names as they appear on the screen. It was intriguing to see the relationship the boys had with these names. All the members were very funny and playful about the game, not taking it too

seriously, as it was not a serious game to begin with, but it was funny to see them genuinely trying to pronounce some of the names that they were unfamiliar with. Some of the members had a better understanding of the English language than others did, and it was humorous to see them trying to work through the pronunciations together.

I noticed for the male names there was some familiarity with the names, “Isaac” and the name “Keith.” The boys made connections with those names to a pastry shop called Isaacs, as well as a musician named Keith Ape. They seemed to struggle more with female names, and in that video, Megan captioned in English as the members tried to work through the names. For instance, they all struggled with the name Juanita. Many of the pairs pronounced the name with a hard ‘J’ sound, but one of the members Jenessi, who also happened to be the eldest and presumably had the most knowledge of the English language, said to his partner, “sometimes the J has an H sound so maybe that’s it,” to which his partner B-JOO gave a confused response but still followed his advice, and then they ended up getting it right by pronouncing the name with a soft ‘H’ sound. As well as being significant to identity, naming is also an important part of branding and marketing. For instance, having a unique, catchy, funny, or easily pronounceable name adds to the consumption of a product and in turn the accessibility of a product becomes larger. In terms of K-pop, an artist or group having a unique name and sometimes even a Westernized name adds to the international marketing, by appealing to a foreign audience it also breaks a barrier of exoticism.

While the members had fun and were joking around during each video, the significance of each video is understanding the importance of what a name means in a general sense. Whether it is Asian or Western, a name is a very important part of any individual’s life and identity. The members of Blackpink are examples of how names and identity are important. For example, out of the four members of the group three of them are foreigners (or consider themselves to be) and only the eldest Jisoo has a Korean name/stage name and is the only one to have been born and raised in Korea. The next member is Jennie (Jennie Kim). She has explained on some Korean programs that her given name is just Jennie and that there is no Korean equivalent given to her by her parents. Her parents gave her this name despite having been born in Korea, but her western name expands deeper into her identity as she spent her childhood in New Zealand and considers herself to be a native of New Zealand and she even has the accent. Similarly, the next member Rosé (who I will discuss in a later chapter) is also from New Zealand but raised in Australia. Unlike Jennie, Rosé does have a Korean name; Park Chaeyoung or Roseanne Park, but she uses Rosé as her stage name. Lastly, Lisa, the only member not of Korean descent. She is Thai and her real name is Pranpriya Manoban or Lalisa Manoban, and she uses a shorted, more westernized version of her name as her stage name. Lisa, Jennie, and Rosé all speak English fluently, which adds to the uniqueness of the group as only one member is not bilingual.

In another example of how a name is important to identity is I.M from the group Monsta X. He is the youngest member of the group with seven Korean members, and he is also the only member to have lived outside of Korea. Although born in Korea, he spent most of his childhood in Israel, and then some of his teen years in Boston. When living outside of Korea he went by his western name, Daniel, but now that he is living and working in Korea full time, he has chosen to go by the stage name ‘I.M’. I.M. which is a play on words to his Korean name. Although he is not going by his western name at this time, he has recently named his own plush doll (as part of

Monsta X official merchandise) “DANY”. This indicates that although he goes by a stage name, both his Korean identity and experiences living overseas factor into who he is as a person.

Megan’s interviews with Topp Dogg became my introduction into their music and the K-pop genre. I started from the beginning of their discography which was their debut in 2013. Their first song was called SAY IT/FOLLOW ME. The music video had a hip-hop sound, fast rap, nice outfits, and amazing choreography and all-around spectacle. Despite being completely immersed and impressed by what I was watching still could not really get into because I did not know what they were singing. I thought that if I could not understand them then I would not be able to connect with it. After a few days, I realized the beat was still stuck in my head, as well as the only English lyrics I could make out from the song. The main English lyrics were “*Follow Me*” or the main chorus “*I wanna get, wanna get high.*” I have come to realize that having some English words in K-pop songs is done purposefully. It adds to the marketing and consumption of the brand, allowing foreign audiences to have a connection to the music in a somewhat subtle way.

The overall spectacle of the video caught my attention the first time I watched it. It was a sensory overload and there was so much to look at and listen to. The beat was very intense, all their outfits were attractive, the set was fascinating as it looked like a warehouse, and even just getting to hear rapping and singing in an unfamiliar language for the first time was exciting. The group had four different rappers with unique voices and styles so to see them blend their styles together was very cool but the thing that really shocked me was the choreography.

I have always been an avid fan of music and the entertainment industry, but I am also a horrible dancer with no rhythm. Seeing people perform such intense moves especially in a fast hip hop paced song was so mesmerizing. Just seeing the way in which people can move their bodies and flow with the music has become my one of my favorite aspects of the genre. In *Follow Me*, they were able to utilize all thirteen members of the group for their choreography. As I have come to learn, the more members a group has, the more difficult the choreography which makes for a better performance. I think the best was when they had two members flip backwards. The flip is best described as two of the members stand beside another member, they hold his arms, lift and he flips. Not only was this visually pleasing it also connected with me on a personal level. It reminded me of the moves we used to do when I was a cheerleader. I was in awe of the level of technique that went into the choreography and overall performance. After this, I fell into a blackhole and listened to the rest of their music.

When listening to their music, as well as other bands, for many international fans there is a primary obstacle to overcome in order to fully enjoy it. The language barrier was one of the struggles I first had when listening to the genre, but I found that there is a whole side of ‘K-pop YouTube’ with content geared towards fans, made by fans, as well as music videos and other content put up by the companies. There is a wide array of content from reaction videos, to lyric videos, to make up looks, to choreography videos, to “learning the members” videos, and much more. Although I had seen the members of Topp Dogg in Meghan’s video, I wanted to learn more about them, and I found out that there are also videos made to introduce new groups or members. This was very helpful because when I originally watched Meghan’s video, Topp Dogg had ten members but in the “Follow” video they had thirteen. From watching the ‘members

profile' video I was able to learn that some of the members had decided to leave the group for various reasons. While content like this is usually made by fans, large entertainment companies are using social media and in particular YouTube to upload music videos, ~~but~~ clips from music shows, and other content as well. Music shows are very popular in Korea and is a major part of the industry putting content on a platform like YouTube is another example of marketing K-pop for mass consumption.

I gradually found myself engaged in other parts of Korean popular media productions in addition to the music such as television programs or 'variety' shows as they are commonly referred to, as well as K-dramas. During this time, I also began to realize another marketing aspect of the industry is that many K-pop groups appear in variety shows or get their own limited series variety programs. The term for the expanding globalization of Korean media is called the Korean Wave. When I first became aware of the Korean Wave, I knew of the obvious differences such as the language barrier but as I started getting deeper into the genre, I started learning more about Korean popular media and the cultural differences. Although I have been a K-pop fan for almost four years there is still much more I want to learn in regard to the industry and the culture, and how it all relates to each other on a global scale.

K-pop and the Korean Wave opened a cultural doorway for me, and I found everything intriguing and different. I was able to connect with the music despite the language barrier. I was able to appreciate it and enjoy. Korean popular culture is a play of differences and commonalities. With the growing popularity of K-pop, it expands to a larger connection with the world and allows for a deeper understanding and appreciation for other cultures. In this senior project I will be examining these connections.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEWING THE LITERATURE—HISTORY, GLOBALIZATION, DIASPORA

This chapter will be looking at the history of K-pop in terms of globalization, soft power, and how western and eastern culture connect and influence each other within KPOP. I will analyze different literature on or about K-pop and its history. I will use an essay by Arjun Appadurai titled, *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy* to define globalization. Then I will use works by Dal Yong Jin and Michael Fuhr to explain how Hallyu and the Korean Wave have specifically expanded into the West, in addition to works by other authors to examine the concept of cultural diaspora in relation to K-pop.

History and Globalization

In his essay, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.” Arjun Appadurai breaks down the definition of globalization through different surroundings and technology. He describes, “Five different types of imagined landscapes that help explain the nature of this “new” global economy. The first is ethnoscapas (people who move between nations such as tourists and immigrants), second is technoscapas (technology, often linked to multinational corporations), then finanscapas (global capital, currency markets, stock exchanges) and finally mediascapas (electronic and new media).”

Each different scape examined by Appadurai relates to several factors of globalization and K-pop. For example, enthoscapas, relates to both producers (the artists) and consumers (the fans). K-pop acts as a kind of virtual tourism. People who are not Korean are exposed to Korean culture though K-pop without actually having to visit Korea. This also relates to Korean Studies specialist Cedarbough Saeji’s thoughts about the Korean tourism market which I will explain below. Additionally, Korean diaspora and Asian Americans also consume and appreciate K-pop as it has a global influence.

Technoscapas are linked to multinational corporations and how the huge and growing industry of K-pop is spread globally. Technoscapas highlight how each individual company choses to promote their artists, especially through conventional broadcast mediums, targeted advertising, spectacular stadium shows, and the dissemination of music itself for sale via various technological formats. Finanscapas relates to K-pop as a more targeted part of the industry such as marketing and sales, which directly affects stockholders, corporations, and the tourist industry in South Korea. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism, in fact, sponsors the genre (Seiji 2019). Finanscapas are in this way connected to soft power and the spread of K-pop as a global commodity. Lastly, mediascapas are similar to technoscapas but has to do with specifically with media, in particular social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. The rise of K-pop can even be seen to parallel the rise of such platforms (Fuhr 2016).

Both Dal Yong Jin and Michael Fuhr share similar views on globalization and by associating it with the historical context of Hallyu. Hallyu is the Korean word for what is known as the ‘Korean Wave.’ The word ‘Han’ refers to Korea while ‘Ryu’ means wave, which has come to reference the expansion of K-pop and similar media. In their works they cite the Korean Wave and the different generations or ‘eras’ of music, as their reasoning for why Korean culture has expanded on a global scale.

In the *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media*. Dal Yong Jin explains the different eras of Hallyu, breaking them down into Hallyu 1.0 and Hallyu 2.0. “Hallyu 1.0 was between 1997-2007 and was mostly focused on major exports such as film and television, whereas the ‘second generation’ or Hallyu 2.0 was from 2008-until the present.” He writes, “The most significant part of the nascent *Hallyu* trend is the evolution of social media and its influence in the realm of local cultural products, because fans around the world heavily access social media to enjoy Korean popular music, digital games, and films (Jin 2017: 30).” He further supports his previous statement by saying that, “Unlike Hallyu 1.0, emphasizing the export of local cultural goods to East Asia between the late 1990s and 2007, the growth of social media has uniquely influenced Korean creative industries, because a few media outlets, such as YouTube and SNSs, have become significant parts of the new Korean Wave (Hallyu 2.0).” (Jin 2017: 12)

In Fuhr’s book, *Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea*, he explains that “it [kpop] is related to the increased exposure of South Korean pop music and culture overseas and to the new visibility that South Korea enjoys in other parts of the world. Formerly ignored or at most recognized for its political conflict with the North or its achievements in the economic and sports sectors, South Korea is currently grabbing the headlines as the new pop cultural hub in the East Asian region and as an export nation for pop music (Fuhr 2016: 6).” He credits this sudden expansion to social media culture.

In an article published by *Synergy: The Journal of Contemporary Asian studies* titled “An Analysis of the Korean Wave,” Benjamin Alperstein explains how Hallyu has made an impact in the US. The author states that “the hybridity of the product and the extensive government influence promoting its success.” One of the most significant reasons why K-pop does so well, and why arts and entertainment companies are huge corporations within Korea is because these programs are supported by their government. The term hybrid is defined as, “the adaptation and active articulation of the global processes with local norms, customs, taste, needs, and traditions (12 Feb. 2017).”

Alperstein also relates hybridity back to Hallyu by saying, “it refers to the ability of Korean pop culture to appeal to different groups. For example, K-pop appeals to a wide audience in part because it features apolitical, family friendly, music and performers.” From there the text describes difference between Western artists and Korean artists and how each is perceived in Korea. For example, the article explains that because “Western artists do not seem to be held to the same standard as Korean idols, within Korea the Western artists can come off as too intense or scary.” The author states, “K-Pop tends to deal with easy topics such as love, while politics and violence are rarely discussed (12 Feb. 2017).”

Dal Yong Jin, in the article “Hallyu 2.0: The New Korean Wave in the Creative Industry,” writes that, “the Korean Wave has especially experienced a significant change with the development of digital technologies and social media, such as YouTube, social network sites (SNSs), and smartphones in the 21st century.” From there Dal Yong Jin continues to emphasize that without the advancement of technology and the popularity of these massively used websites that are used to connect people around the world, K-pop might not have spread to the degree it has now (Jin 2012).” Although having just become popularized in western culture within the past few years, the K-pop industry has been thriving in Korea since the eighties and nineties.

Music became an important part of Korean culture Korean war when it was impacted by western influence. It has grown into its own billion-dollar industry and has become a source of pride from many Koreans and Asians in general, as well as one of Korea's major exports.

The National Public Radio (NPR) article, "How the Korean Government Made K-pop a Thing" (2015), describes the influence Western culture had on K-pop when it was first starting: "it turns out that the Korean government treats its K-pop industry the way that the American government treats its automobile and banking industry, meaning that these are industries that have to be protected." Although it took ideas from western culture at first, K-pop has expanded into its own culture and draws influence from more Asian aesthetics. K-pop has become a prominent force within western culture after years of being molded into a symbol of Korean nationalism. The author continues to explain how even at that time, Korea's hope for the future of Korea was to resemble American culture. "They wanted Korea of the 21st century to be like America of the 20th century where America was just considered so universally cool that anything made in America would automatically be bought." As the article states, and as other examples will show is how influential Western culture has been on K-pop and how that has affected it, but yet it did not really help with its popularity or break through in media until now despite how long it's been around. The music scene has become such a successful commodity and almost acts as a symbol of national pride (NPR 2015).

Similarly, in one of her online video lectures, Cedarbough Saeji, a Korean studies professor who specializes in K-Pop, explains and dissects how K-pop music, although originally influenced by western culture, has tried to keep the music and videos more Korean in an effort to appeal to the younger generations and audiences (2019). "Western" culture is not necessarily the selling point for younger audiences. K-pop's break through global appeal owes just as much to its connections to Korean culture, as it does its usage of western popular music forms. In a later chapter I will also personally be watching and analyzing some K-pop videos that I think are important and are some examples of how diverse the genre is, but for now I will explain how Seiji's video connects to and supports the history of K-pop. The first point she makes in her video is that K-pop is connected to the traditional history of Korea. She starts off with a slide by saying "the government utilized Hallyu to drive tourism," and "that the Korean government originally invested in K-pop as a way to expand on the cultural part of tourism." She also explained that while the government has backed the expansion of the K-pop industry they were not profiting directly from this (2019).

In the book *The Korean Wave Evolution, Fandom and Transnationality*, by Tae Jin Yoon and Dal Yong Jin they support Saeji's work by explaining that "the term Hallyu was first used by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Korea when it planned, produced, and distributed a music CD in order to publicize K-pop to neighboring countries in 1999 (Yoon and Jin 2017: 4)."

The first K-pop company, now still considered the biggest in Korea, SM ENTERTAINMENT, was founded in 1995 by Lee Soo Man. According to Forbes Asia, "S.M. kicked off the K-pop phenomenon in the 1990s. With its boot-camp-style training for the performers and production-line approach to the music, it perfected the model for churning out acts that storm Top 40 charts and pack concert halls across Asia and beyond. An S.M. report lays out the industrial scale of the enterprise (Solomon 2013)." SM Entertainment started the idol

program and produced some of K-pops first major stars. This helped with promoting the newly formed genre to the masses in Korea. Some of the most popular groups of the 90s were H.O.T. (who were with S.M. Entertainment), Baby V.O.X. and many popular solo artists.

One of the first Korean boy groups responsible for popularizing K-pop music, not only in the West, but for Koreans as well, was a group called Seo Taiji and the Boys. They were active from 1992-1996 and comprised of three members, Seo Taiji, Yang Hyun-suk, and Lee Juno. Yang Hyun-suk went on to be the founder and CEO of one of the biggest and most popular entertainment companies in Korea, YG Entertainment. John Lie explains that being one of the first major successful K-pop groups they are responsible for pioneering certain aspects of the genre. For example, “introducing dance as a critical element of their performance... Yet in bringing together the latest American trends in sound and movement, Seo Taiji and the Boys announced themselves as something new in South Korean popular music” (Solomon 2013).

K-pop can be broken down into several ‘generations’ or ‘eras’ of music. This topic can be debated but through a YouTube account called DareDB I was able to find a video breaking down the different generations into an easy to understand timeline. The narrator explains that, the first generation began in 1992, with groups like Seo Taiji, and had milestones such as the creation of sub-genre ‘trot music’ and the founding of SM entertainment. The second generation started in 2004 with groups like TVXQ taking the reins as many of their senior groups from SM had already moved onto other projects. This was also a year that many soloists such as Rain, and BoA, grew to fame. As the narrator explains, the next phase started in 2007, with the creation of groups like Big Bang and Girls Generation. This was known as ‘Golden Age of K-pop.’ Other popular groups debuted during this time were 2NE1, Wonder Girls, SHINee, and many others. All these groups are still very popular in Korea today, but Big Bang, and 2NE1 (also both being from YG entertainment) are known as the ‘founding’ groups in terms of international success. PSYs Gangnam Style is the official start of the third generation in the 2012, with PSY being the most viral sensation of the year. Popular groups that defined 2012 were EXO, VIXX, EXID, AOA, and many more. In 2013 we got groups like BTS, Mamamoo, and Red Velvet, and closing out the third generation was Blackpink who debuted in 2016.

As of 2020, I’d say we are still in the midst of the third generation and possibly entering the fourth generation, as groups like BTS, Mamamoo, GOT7 and Blackpink who all debuted in the middle of the third generation are still active and have surpassed their seniors. I also think this could be seen as a new phase of Hallyu altogether. *Hallyu 3.0* is the culmination of K-pop across different social spheres or landscapes, returning to Appadurai’s ideas at the beginning of this chapter. Mukbangs (virtual eating rooms, where people gorge themselves on a variety of foods), K-beauty, trend on YouTube along with the music itself, receiving thousands, if not millions of hits. With K-pop groups like BTS performing at the Grammys and Blackpink being the first Korean Group to headline Coachella, as well as seeing K-pop idol fashion become popular around platforms like Instagram, and then finally with films like Parasite winning Best Picture at the Oscars we have entered a new era of Hallyu.

K-Pop and Diaspora

According to Evans-Brazier and Mannir, diaspora is term that conjures a multiplicity of feelings, states, and experienced, that are not easily classified. The term can be used to describe

experiences of individuals or specific groups or class of people. For instance, Asians, Asian Americans, gays, lesbians, Europeans, etc. They explain why diaspora is necessary and important to discuss on a global scale. It is “part of the value (and necessity) of thinking about different diasporas in transnational settings is that it offers an alternative paradigm for national (or multinational, transnational, and even post national) identification (Evans-Brazier and Mannur 2003: 8).”

Despite diaspora’s complexities as a term, I was able to piece together my own definition of diaspora via Brazier and Mannur’s text. My definition of diaspora is the continuing changing and negotiated experiences of a minority group, as it functions on a larger scale in relation to mainstream society, which aims to negate that very diasporic experience. An example of a diaspora experience is how Asian Americans living in the U.S. stay connected to their culture, but also helps them assimilate to life in the U.S., which has grown more and more global and divers. For myself, this includes the idea of Asian Americans connecting to K-pop, whether or not they are Korean.

Sociologist Min Sung Kang has another definition of diaspora as well as the specific break down of the term. She explains that “diaspora is often used to describe a dispersion of people from a common origin.” Kang goes on to differentiate between the three common types of diaspora: “original, classical, and contemporary (2003: 13).” She suggests that the Korean diaspora fits in best with the contemporary form of diaspora in which people of one country are divided between different countries (2003:13).

In “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences,” East Asian Studies scholar Lisa Lowe breaks down Asian American culture and life in American on a deeper level. Lowe explains that, “instead of thinking of Asian American culture as “hierarchical and familial” that we should examine “Asian American culture through the struggle between generations in the deeper familial framework.” She suggests that we should think of Asian American culture ““horizontally” between gender, race and national origin (Lowe 2003: 132).” She introduces the terms “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity,” and breaks down the complexity of looking at Asian Americans through a finer lens and points out that not all Asian groups are the same. She says that all the groups are distinct and should be looked through social, cultural, and economic lenses. Another important factor she discusses the sense of nationalism all minority groups struggle with. Lowe says that there are several sides to the topic of Asian American nationalism. The first describes the relationship and opposition of nationalism and cultural assimilation. This viewpoint is valuable in helping understand the viewpoint of Asian American K-pop fans living in the United States, as opposed to other international fans, and non-Asian fans. This also adds to the cultural dynamics between Korean Americans born and raised in the U.S. and native-born Koreans (Lowe 2003:138).

I have compiled a list of K-pop idols, or musicians working in the Korean entertainment industry. Outlined below I analyze the good and bad sides of entertainment industry but first I provide an example of a Korean American media personality who re-connected with his culture due to the expansion of K-pop.

An American popular culture example of diaspora in relationship to identity is Korean American YouTube personality, Eugene Lee Yang. He is one fourth of the internet comedy group the Try Guys. A few years ago, the Try Guys did a four-part series about K-pop. In this series of videos, they attended KCON LA in which they learned K-pop dances, got their makeup

done like famous female idols, and much more. Throughout this series Lee Yang shared insight into his own upbringing, and how growing up as an Asian kid (who is also gay) in Texas, he was bullied a lot. He was constantly told that he was ugly, but now as an adult seeing Korean culture become popularized and revered by Western culture, he has learned to embrace his race and culture. He has started listening to and incorporating K-pop music into his life and into live shows. His story explains his diasporic experience and blends the two worlds of K-pop fandom and internet culture. This connects the Korean culture and popular media to global platforms like YouTube.

CHAPTER 3: CASE STUDIES IN THE K-POP INDUSTRY

Being a K-pop idol trainee is an intense struggle. Often times it can be brutal and sexist, and once someone has debuted as an idol their life suddenly becomes open to public scrutiny and judgement.

In this section I will work through some case studies of certain idols. While all of these cases are important and provide a glimpse into the life of a K-pop idol trainee, some deal with more important issues than others. The topics covered are becoming a trainee when you are a kid, being a mixed-race idol, and being on a survival program. While these will not be as intense or saddening as the next section it is still important insight into the K-pop industry. In part two of this section I will be looking into the scarier side of idol life. For both sections, I used various outlets to put together my case studies. I used a combination of social media and Korean news outlets.

CASE 1. Joshua and Rosé – the foreigners

In the previous chapter I examined literature that focuses on diaspora and the topic of identity. I used an example of a Korean American Youtuber, who, despite being raised in America was able to connect more with his ‘Korean side’ and was able to become proud of his culture because of the success of K-pop. These first two cases will deal with identity and race within the idol industry.

It is not uncommon for many non-native Koreans to pursue careers in Korea. For example, Joshua Hong from the group Seventeen grew up in California. He has discussed how he got discovered in several interviews. Growing up in L.A., he went to a music festival competition in a mall where he did really well and was asked to fly to Korea and audition for some music companies. In one interview, after his group had performed on a very popular Korean television program. the announcer let Joshua send out a message to his family back home in the U. S. In this message he mentioned that he had grown up watching this program with his grandmother all the time, so it was special for him and his family to finally see him on it. This sense of pride is still relevant even for Korean artists who did not grow up there.

Joshua debuted in 2015, in a group called Seventeen. His group not only has the distinction of being known as “self-producing idols,” but they seem to be one of the only groups of the 2010s to have had their trainee days actually recorded in a television program called Seventeen TV which gave the fans an inside look at what the boys went through, dance practices, vocal practices, songwriting, with fun games mixed in.

Rosé from BlackPink had a similar experience, although she is not from America. She was born in New Zealand but raised in Australia, while living in Australia as a teenager she competed in a talent competition and won. She was immediately asked to go to Korea and become a trainee.

Despite neither of them growing up in Korea, they still felt a connection to their culture and were both raised in very Korean homes.

The article, “For Asian American Artists K-pop is a Homecoming” from MTV NEWS (2019), breaks down the history of Korean Americans in K-pop as well as those who grew up in

the U.S. Leading the way for Korean American artists promoting in Korean in the late 90s was Tiger JK, a Korean hip-hop artist who still very well respected. His K-pop career began as the leader of hip-hop group Drunken Tiger. His family moved to Los Angeles in the 1980s and his adolescent life was heavily influenced by the African American community. Today his married to fellow Korean American hip-hop artist Yoon Mirae and is a well-respected artist in career. His career has influenced other Korean American artists such as Jessi, SanE, Mad Clown, Flowsik.

The article explains that the original appeal of having Korean American idols in K-pop groups was due to an ‘exoticism’ of having a foreign member who is also able to speak the language or still connect to the culture. “In the contemporary K-pop scene, however, Korean Americans and other diaspora Koreans play an additional role: a specialized part of a carefully curated idol group, serving as a cultural intermediary for international marketing. For example, when Girls’ Generation first ventured into the U.S. market in 2012, groups Korean Americans Tiffany and Jessica did most of the talking during interviews.”

Referring back to Min Sung Kang’s work in the previous chapter, “the idea of a ‘transnational identity, and specifically a Korean transnational identity brought on by the Korean Wave is the thought that “the Korean Wave has in essence provided an avenue to develop a stronger sense of identity. A [stronger] Korean identity among diaspora Korean’s all over the world will build loyalty to their ethnic homeland, [which] is bound to bring numerous long-term benefits to [South Korea]” (Kang citing Gamlen 2003: 16).

CASE 2. Vernon, Somi, and Yoon Mirae– mixed race idols

Mixed-race idols in Korea tend to face criticism as being mixed race is not widely accepted in Korean culture. Through idols and other mixed-race people in the media this subject is being less taboo and less exoticized. Some well-known idols who have faced criticism and racism for being mixed race include Vernon, Yoon Mirae, and Jeon Somi.

One of several young idols who is speaking up about racism and the bullying they have received growing up due to stereotypes is Vernon of the group Seventeen. His full name is Hansol Vernon Choi. His mother is American, and his father is Korean. He was born in New York in 1998 but his family moved to Korea when he was five years old. As part of combating racism, he defends the fact that he is culturally Korean and knew nothing about New York or much about the States in general until Seventeen visited for the first time. This is in comparison to Joshua, who was born and raised in L.A. and is actually a foreigner.

Jeon Somi was born, Ennik Duoma in Canada to a Korean mother and Canadian father. Much like Vernon, she moved to Korea when she was young.

Yoon Mirae is a very successful rapper and rap group member living in South Korea. She was born Natasha Shanta Reid, in Texas in 1981 to a Korean mother and African American father. Her family moved back to Korea when she was a child and she grew up in Korea where she faced criticism for being mixed race.

In 2007, she married fellow rapper Tiger JK. They are both very influential figures not only in the Korean hip hop industry, but as advocates for mixed race families and foreigners in Korea.

Joshua and Rosé (who are both foreigners and identify as such) are more accepted within Korean society because they both have more Korean or Asian features. Vernon, Yoon Mirae, and Somi, are criticized due to their western and African features although they spent their formative years in Korea.

Lisa Lowe's work in the previous chapter adds to this case. Specifically, I will be focusing on Yoon Mirae and the idea of assimilation. The text differentiates and compares the terms nationalism and assimilation in regard to feminist discourse. Lowe cites the work of Elaine Kim when discussing this topic. She argues that Kim's views on the topic describe the difference between identity and heterogeneity rather than nationalism and assimilation. Citing Fanon, Lowe explains that "some forms of nationalism can obscure class. Asian American feminists point out that Asian American cultural nationalism or the construction of a 'fixed' native Asian American subject—obscures gender. The trope that opposes nativism and assimilationism can be itself a "colonialist" figure used to displace the challenges of heterogeneity, or subalternity, by casting the as assimilationist or anti-cultural nationalist (Lowe 2003: 146)."

Lowe furthers her points by using evidence of a Chinese American mother and daughter. In the example she explains that the daughter one day decided to take her mother out to a spa, as a kind gesture to show her mother that she loves her. But from the mother's point of view she feels insulted by her daughters' gesture---as she thinks her daughter is ashamed and finds her ugly (Lowe 2003: 148)." This relates to Yoon Mirae in that she grew up in South Korean with a Korean mother who did everything she could to make her daughter feel accepted in a society that judged her based on her dark skin.

Although she spent her childhood growing up in Korea, Yoon Mirae still faced stereotypes and discrimination from a very young age. The text describes the struggle and debate about Asian American identity, while this also specifically relates to Asian Americans living in the U.S. I think this also connects to Yoon Mirae and her experiences as a young girl growing up in country where she was a minority because she was half African American and half Korean.

The reading uses a specific example about women of color and their struggles with identity. "Many women of color feel obliged [to choose] between ethnicity and womanhood: how can they? You never/are one without the other. The idea of two illusorily separated identities, one ethnic, the other woman (precisely female). Partakes in the Euro-American system of dualistic reasoning (Lowe 2003: 144)." In an example of a non-Asian mixed-race artist struggling with identity I think of the pop star Halsey. Halsey had a white mother and African American father and has publicly talked about how growing up (and even now) she always felt more of a connection to her African American side, although she is white passing. Both women face racism and internal struggles due to not completely fitting into the community they want to as neither have the right features or skin coloring to be accepted by their peers.

CASE 3. Jihyo, Jungkook, and Samuel– the kids

Children can audition to become trainees at a very young. Jihyo the leader of girl group Twice has talked about how she officially entered JYP entertainment as a trainee when she was nine years old and officially debuted when she was 18. Jihyo had been training for ten years just for one chance, and her dream ended up becoming a reality. Although she was not the eldest

member, because of her experience as the longest trainee member she was chosen to become the leader of the group.

In an article published by the website SBS POP ASIA, Jihyo was interviewed and talked about her time as a trainee and how she tried to keep a positive attitude during almost ten years of training, thinking she might never debut. She said, "I was a trainee for more than 10 years. I became concerned about when I would be making my debut and if this career really suits me or not." She said thinking of the future gave her strength, adding: "Think about the people who are cheering you on and think about those who would be listening to your music. Do not be intimidated and go for your dreams" (SBS 2015).

Jungkook, the youngest member or (maknae) of BTS, started auditioning for music companies around the age of 11-13. He had auditioned for some of the big companies but got rejected. Eventually, he was signed under BigHit entertainment, and debuted in BTS at just 14 years old in 2013.

Samuel, a former member of Seventeen, who appeared on the program Seventeen TV as a trainee along with the other 17 boys, when he was just twelve years old. His mother was afraid that being a pop idol would mean he would miss out on his childhood and school. He was able to debut a few years later under a stage name and at age 18 he has debuted under his real name.

CASE 4. Jin and Shin Ryujin- the attractive lucky ones

While Jihyo had to spend her childhood as a trainee, there are unique cases of people being scouted randomly. BTS member Jin, and member of girl group ITZY, Ryujin both got scouted and asked to audition through usual circumstances, solely based on their looks.

Jin was originally approached by scouting agents while walking down the street. At the time, like a normal human would when being approached by a random person off the street, he declined the offer. Then in 2012 he was approached again by a different scouting agent while getting off a bus, and because he was originally studying to be an actor he decided to go for an audition and eventually made it as a finalist in the group BTS.

Another example is Shin Ryujin of the girl group ITZY. She recently talked about her experience during a radio talk show appearance. She was a fan of JYP Entertainment and its artists and was concert when she was approached by a scouting agent of course, Ryujin was suspicious at first but as she explains, "she ended up giving the woman her number because she thought the woman was so cute." Eventually she was brought into audition, became a trainee, and debuted in the girl group ITZY in 2019.

The significance of these stories is that it is very atypical of the regular idol experience. Although they both still had to go through the trainee process (as opposed to being put into a group right away), the idea that they were both scouted based on their looks shows the strict beauty standards in Korea. Outward appearance is so important that someone could be found so attractive, that even if they are not known to be talented, they could be molded into an idol. Being attractive is a huge part of being an idol, and for Jin one of his titles in the group along with being the eldest, and a vocalist is "the visual."

Luck plays into both of their experiences. They are both part of groups that are hugely popular and are changing the views of K-pop. BTS has become global idols and ITZY, although still a new group, have songs that speak to a feminist perspective. Most of what goes on in a group is due to members and management, but luck also play a part in their lives, as it did on the days when they were both scouted.

CASE 5. Shownu (Monsta X)- survival program

Today, there are television programs that let you watch the creation of idol groups from the very beginning, we have similar programs in the West they are nowhere near as intense. Some of these programs are strictly company based, while other programs allow trainees from different companies to compete together in a chance to either debut or re-debut (usually for a temporary amount of time). For example, SIXTEEN (JYP trying to form his now popular girl group Twice), No. Mercy (Starship Entertainment trying to form Monsta X), Produce 101 a multi-company program where trainees can appear in a competition based series in order to debut in the shows own group (for example I.O.I. and Wanna One).

As was the case for Jihyo, many idols are subjected to survival programs in the hopes of debuting. They have to fight for the chance to prove they are deserving of a chance to be in a group, even if they have trained for many years.

An example of this would be the members of boy group Monsta X. The group was formed through a reality survival program called NO.MERCY, and although 12 boys competed, only seven made the final cut and ended up in the group. Arguably the most notable member to have made it to the group is the leader and eldest member of the group Shownu (real name Son Hyunwoo).

Throughout the show Shownu talked about his experience as an idol trainee. He had originally auditioned for JYP Entertainment and had been a trainee there for several years, even making friends with the members of GOT7. While still in his trainee days, he even got the opportunity to be a backup dancer for one Korea's biggest solo artists, Lee Hyori. He was moved to Starship Entertainment as a trainee and joined the survival program NO.MERCY.

During that program he was allowed to go visit his friends from JYP (GOT7) who had just debuted. They were all happy to see each other and the boys were telling him not give up hope, and that now it would be his turn, but obviously being in a survival program with twelve other guys he was nervous. At one point he reflected on what his life would have been like had he not changed companies, he wondered if he would have debuted in the same group as he friends or at the same time.

The theme of the show really was "NO.MERCY," twelve male trainees went in and only seven came out and would debut in what is now Monsta X. Having watched the program several times it is tragic to see and listen to everyone's backstories especially for those who were eliminated. For instance, one of the trainees Wonho, (who would end up as a member of Monsta X) mentioned during one of the personal interviews that his family was in debt and that he felt pressure to succeed so he could make them proud and sometimes he felt like he could not go home because he would not want to see his mother disappointed. This mentality is not unusual for idol trainees.

As is usual with survival programs, sometimes the producers will add in an extra element of surprise in which the participants must deal with. This was the case for NO.MERCY, more than halfway through the competition another trainee was brought in by surprise. He was I.M who made it into the group but other boys felt angry that they had all worked so hard through the competition to even make it close to the finals, and now someone new was getting almost a free ride to the end of the competition. Even now, whenever Monsta X is asked to reminisce about NO.MERCY, they refer to it as “hell broadcasting.”

Along with the mental and physical strain of even just TRAINING to become an idol, once someone debuts the scrutiny becomes even worse because they are open to the public eye and supposed to assume a certain type of behavior and standard. Anything that goes against fan standards will be commented on. This is discussed below, into the next section in which I explain the dark side of the K-pop industry.

MORE CASES: The Dark Side of K-Pop

As briefly mentioned, at the beginning of this chapter, there is a much darker side to the K-pop industry than I focused on in the first half of the chapter. In this section I will investigate some of the more problematic elements of the Korean pop music industry. In this section I want examine the consequences for becoming a trainee or a full-fledged idol. Many idols have suffered and reported cases of sexism, abuse, and other means of exploitation through their companies during their trainee periods. One of the biggest consequences of being an idol is the constant spotlight, which means constant criticism, and can take a toll on their mental health. The strain that idols endure has become a controversial topic in Korea. While in some ways Korea is progressive, in other ways its societal values are still conservative, particularly regarding issues of gender, sexuality, and mental health. I find this very fascinating when juxtaposed with what it means to be an idol. For instance, along with talent and good looks, idols are expected to pander to fans. As mentioned previously the whole market is driven by appeasing fans, and yet when it comes to important topics of race and mental health, when analyzed even from the perspective of an idol, Korea still has many conservative views.

Recently, the K-pop community has lost several idols to suicide, due to the lack of help they received in regard to their mental health, which has sparked a public outrage and plea from fans for better help for their favorite idols. In the age of social media these pressures can become even more harmful as people have access to public forums, and information about their favorite idols.

CASE 1. Jonghyun, and Sulli- Lack of Mental Health Help and Suicide

In December 2017, the K-pop world faced one of its most tragic deaths. Kim Jonghyun of the five-member group SHINee had committed suicide. This seemed to have come out of nowhere and the entire K-pop community was shaken by his passing. His death had seemed to ignite the conversation about mental health amongst K-pop idols, as well as the suicide problem in Korea. Most recently, in October of 2019 the K-pop community lost another idol. This time it was Sulli a former member and maknae (youngest member) of girl group F(X). She was born Choi Jinri. After her passing it once again continued to address the problem that had been

sparked from Jonghyun's death, but also opened up conversations of online bullying and lack of support from their companies. Both Jonghyun and Sulli were signed with SM Entertainment.

In the days after her passing, it had been revealed that Sulli had reached out for help several times and never received the proper help. She publicly spoke out about being a feminist, and against the conservative country of Korea. Due to her publicly admitting these things she received swarms of online hate. She would also share with fans that sometimes she never felt like she was being her real self because she would still feel depressed.

For the K-pop community, after the death of Jonghyun K-pop fans all over the world began advocating for better mental health care for idols. This challenged the Korean cultural taboo surrounding mental health issues. After the recent passing of Sulli and followed shortly by the passing of one of Sulli's close friends Koo Hara, also to suicide, we see that unfortunately there seems to be no change in any policies.

I believe some companies handle these issues better than others for example, when JYP let one of the members of girl group TWICE take a hiatus from the group due to anxiety. SM is credited as Korea's biggest and most profitable entertainment company and therefore should take better care of its artists since they are under constant pressure from the media, haters, and fans.

CASE 2. Alexandra Reid- Foreigners and Racism

While many mixed-race idols are speaking out about discrimination they face, the issue of race and foreign identity in general is still a major problem in Korean society. Trying to combat this issue was former K-pop idol Alex Reid. She was in a group called BP (Black Pearl) RaNia. She is credited as the first African American K-pop idol. During an interview with former Korean Rapper Grace (who has also shared her industry horror stories on her YouTube channel), they talked about the drama that Alex went through as an idol and swapped stories exposing the dark side of the K-music industry.

She was living in LA and was working in the entertainment industry when she came in contact with K-pop producers and writers during a songwriting program. After being approached she initially told them that she was not even Asian, let alone Korean, and they said that was obvious. They did a few conference calls and she did a video audition and that was it. She was flown to Korea two weeks later to become an idol.

Trainees go through basic training of dance, singing, rapping, and whatever their specialty might be, but for foreigners they also have to go through a language class and have to study Korean regularly. This was one of the major issues Alex revealed. She was never given the proper language tutoring or training and was thrown into a group right away. Thankfully, she had some group members who spoke English well enough to help her out. Due to her lack of understanding she would constantly be criticized for seeming unprofessional when in reality she had nobody around to tell her what to do. This also hurt the group because she could not communicate with them and as the leader of the group lacking in communication was a major problem.

Another issue she mentioned was that her group had a ‘cycle’ system in which former members left or ‘graduated’ and then new members came in. No one told her that the other girls from the first cycle would be leaving. When the next cycle of girls came along, Alex said, they did not get along. She said she felt bad, and like a burden she was unable to communicate with them. In the previous cycle, she had a girl who helped with translation now she was left on her own with other girls who did not speak English.

Wooseok Lee’s article, “*Diversity of K-Pop: A Focus on Race, Language, and Musical Genre*,” goes more in depth about the issues of race in Korea and the music industry. Lee also adds his own section about Alex and her time in RaNia, as well as more of the cultural struggles she faced which she did not completely go into during her sit-down interview with her friend Grace.

Lee writes, “As the first African American member of a K-pop group, Reid has been faced with condemnation in reaction to her skin color. Some people denounce Reid due to her appearing whiter and appropriating Korean culture. For instance, ‘after a recent Lunar New Year photo shoot featuring RaNia wearing traditional Korean clothing, Reid alone faced major criticism for daring to wear the outfit; nobody questioned whether RaNia’s Chinese member should be wearing Korean clothing’” (Lee citing Herman: 2018).

“Based on the K-pop industry’s norm; in many cases the agency or producer has a right of decision, we can assume that bleaching her skin, changing her hair, and appropriating Korean culture are not her decisions, but her agency’s determination” (Lee 2018).

Next, he explains that “Her experiences in the K-pop field represent that Korean society is not prepared to face a multiracial environment. Also, what she experienced is an example of racism and racial exploitation. Her racial features could not be protected by forcing to conform to the standard of beauty in Korean society and K-pop, whereas her musical distinctiveness was exploited by capitalists in the K-pop field” (Lee 2018).

Lee’s work along with Alex’s personal accounts prove that there is still a major issue regarding race within the K-pop industry. This type of situation is also a testament to smaller companies (or entertainment companies in general) just wanting to profit off of someone ‘exotic’ but not providing them with the tools they need to fully succeed. There is still so much prejudice against non-Koreans trying to have successful music careers in Korea, but it also really shows in their ignorance towards black people in Korea. Alex is a prime example of this, as all she did was try her best with what she was given and never wanted to complain but ultimately people bullied her for things that were beyond her control.

CASE 3. Multiple Idols—Cyberbullying, Eating Disorders

While cyberbullying is a factor within all of these cases, with the constant use of social media and the platforms used by artists and fans to interact it adds to the already hectic lives of being an idol. Recently many idols have spoken out about the pressures they have felt from fans, critics, or even from their companies forcing them to diet. While researching these cases I looked through various sources including social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, as well as corroborating these news items through K-pop news websites.

TWICE (girl group)—*Diet Restriction*

It is very common for female idols to be held to a much stricter standard when training. Many have spoken out about how they would not be allowed to gain weight or eat certain foods during their trainee days. I recently saw a video circulating through Instagram which shows the girls of K-pop group TWICE describing a time when they had to sneak food up to their dorms because they were on a diet restriction. The video shows some of the members standing at their window balcony, looking out to the delivery person, and apologizing for not being polite and for having to set up a rig system. Using a rope attached to basket pulley system they send the money down and the delivery man puts the food in the basket and sends it back up to them. This is an extreme length they had to go to because they were craving something they were told not to eat. While the video has some funny moments, this is a very real issue that many idols but mostly females have had to deal with and in turn cause many female idols to develop eating disorders such as anorexia, this restriction is usually also accompanied by online criticism towards females.

In another instance, during a VLIVE (livestreaming app) Twice member Momo, stated that she had only eaten one ice cube that day and nothing else. While this might have been a joke, it is not far off from what female idols actually go through. Many are victims of the ‘one meal a day’ rule.

KYLA (PRISTIN)—*Cyberbullying, Body Shaming*

In 2017, Pledis Entertainment debuted a new ten-member girl group called Pristin. The group later disbanded in 2019, with only two albums under their belt. During their time together the youngest member Kyla, who is Korean American and was only 18 at the time received the most criticism out of the group for being ‘bigger’ and not meeting Korean beauty standards. Many people online called her fat and told her to lose weight, saying she cannot be a fat K-pop idol. Although Kyla seemed to ignore the hate comments, this also sparks a cultural debate as many international fans came to her defense, again mentioning the cultural standards.

According to multiple K-pop news outlets even before the group’s disbandment Kyla had moved back to the states due to a concussion (supposedly) although this also caused drama and tension between the fans and the Entertainment company as fans thought there was more drama going on behind the scenes with Kyla and her family. The Entertainment company might not want to have shared this information due to it being personal.

Kyla has been living in L.A. with her family, and has started her own YouTube channel, in a recent video she finally addressed the rumors of her departure from the group before the disbandment, as well as how she was treated by the company. Luckily, she gave a positive response explaining that the company never forced any of the girls to diet or lose weight, it was solely the girl’s decisions. Then she mentions a specific incident in which they were on a variety program and they were given food to eat, and although, she was on a diet herself at the time, she did not want to eat the food but also did not want to be impolite, which is why she looked uncomfortable during that event. (She did not disclose what the exact situation was in her video).

CHAE SISTERS (ITZY AND IZONE)—*Cyberbullying*

In another case of internet cyberbullying we have the “Chae” sisters who have been the most recent targets. The Chae sisters, Chaeyeon and Chaeryeong have been the victims of online bullying since their respective debuts. Older sister Chaeyeon debuted in a group called IZ*ONE through a survival program. Chaeryeong had also competed on a show called SIXTEEN but was eliminated but has since debuted in ITZY last year.

Both girls are signed with JYP Entertainment.

Several K-pop news sources as well as Twitter and Instagram are constantly reposting these stories, which is where I got my information from. Both sisters are criticized for their looks and are called ‘ugly’. One fan even reported that during a fan meeting with IZ*ONE, Chaeyeon had thanked someone for “liking and supporting her even though she is ugly.” The hate against Chaeryeong had gotten so bad last year immediately after her groups successful debut that their mother wrote a public letter asking people to stop the hate.

Fans have translated and circulated the letter all over the internet. From the translation I found, their mother wrote, “...Even if you guys do not find her pretty, you don’t have to leave hurtful comments on every article and video whenever [you want] without hesitation. If she did anything that is bad or some messed up things, of course she will get judged from others. However, you guys are pointing a finger on 19-year-old kids’ appearance. Everyone has their own charms and their own preferences. It is so sad and hurtful to see my innocent and precious daughter get scolded for her appearance. Please...just keep your words to yourself. Chaeryeong is a kind and well-mannered child. Please look after her. You don’t have to be nice, but please don’t hurt her...Please.” Recently, I have found a Twitter thread someone made of more mistreat towards Chaeryeong, still constant cyber-attacks regarding her appearance to not being properly promoted as much as the other girls. The Twitter user also pointed out that while Chaeryeong is supposed to be credited as the main dancer for the group she is almost always seen in the back during performances.

This brings up another important topic amongst entertainment companies; the idea of favoritism which many companies have been accused of. Even JYP himself, during several appearances and interviews has admitted that he does favor and treat the girl groups nicer than the male groups. Since ITZY are still a new girl group, issues like group or individual member promotions will probably get better as the group gets older, but the bullying will probably continue especially if it has not subsided even after her mother’s public plea. It is normal for newer groups to not be focused on as much, or to have to deal with more unfairness due to their status in the industry, but as I mentioned in the first half of this chapter, JYP did allow one of the members of TWICE to take time off due to her anxiety, but as an inexperienced group they were also forced to diet. Since they are now the most successful girl group under JYP entertainment and they are bringing in money for the company, there could be an element of favoritism as they seem to get better treatment.

KONG YOO JIN (Former idol of BOUNSBABY)—*Diet Restrictions, Withholding Family*

Through a Korean popular culture news account, called THEKTEA, I saw a report in the Korea Times about a former female idol who broke her silence on the harm she faced during her trainee days (2019). Former idol trainee Kong Yoo Jin spoke out about her days as a trainee and the hardships she endured, that ultimately led to her quitting the idol life. She had been a member of the short-lived group BonusBaby under Maroo Entertainment. One of the main things Kong told the Korea Times about was the weight management, and how the company would weigh the idols, mostly females, a few times a day. Another thing she reported was that she was restricted from seeing her family.

In the Korea Times interview, she breaks down the process of dieting and weighting that she faced daily. “The agency told us we should weigh no more than 46 kilograms (101.4 pounds). My height is 164 cm (5.3 feet). I refused to eat. I would normally have one pack of soymilk for the entire day. I used to replace meals with a sip or two from a small pack of soymilk while practicing dance moves all day long.”

“On days I would eat a little more, I strictly controlled my portions and ate two eggs, ten cherry tomatoes, ten almonds a day. I was 42 kilograms (92.5 pounds) at that time. We had to get on the scale whenever we got back into the office. They compare the weight before and after going out. Sometimes we had to step on the scale for up to 10 times a day. We had a hard time controlling our appetite so the agency would later prohibit outdoor meetings with our parents.”

It is not just female idols who deal with weight control, more and more male idols are also speaking out about their body image issues. For example, Jimin a member of boy group BTS has a solo song called Lie in which he chronicles the internal struggle of a person who is dealing with body issues. He has also publicly discussed his own issues, saying that when fans would comment sometimes, they would ask where his abs went. This made him feel insecure and relates back to the issue of cyber criticism online by fans towards their idols.

WONHO (Monsta X)—*Cyberbullying, Defamation*

In one of the most recent cases of cyberbullying amongst idols is the case of Wonho from Monsta X. Following the release of Monsta X’s new album, coincidentally titled, *Follow: Find You*. A wave of drama and scandal hit the group.

Out of nowhere a swarm of drama surrounding Wonho had started to surface. These accusations included mocking the MeToo Movement, smoking, and gambling. A video clip of him and his fellow members at a fan event and making jokes about each other, in which a joke he made became twisted and misconstrued. It is no secret to fans of Monsta X that Wonho is the member who takes his shirt off and perform ‘skinship’ (defined below) and ‘fan service’ the most. The joke he was making was in regard to himself always taking his own shirt off to please fans, and yet someone on Twitter started saying it was about the MeToo movement.

The other accusations were about unpaid debt, theft, and weed consumption (which is a huge taboo in Korea, especially for celebrities). All of these accusations being thrown around at

once caused Wonho to withdraw from the group on October 31st, 2019, as he did not want his poor image to affect the other members or their recent comeback.

Even before an investigation had been launched fans were able to find out that these rumors had been fueled by one source. Two women named Han Seo Hee and Ju Da Eun , have been linked to other idol scandals, and recently been involved in spreading false rumors about Wonho. Han Seo Hee has been arrested several times, due to her involvement in some of these scandals, but because she comes from a very wealthy family in Korea none of the arrests have stuck.

Only recently, on March 13th, 2020, was it announced that after an investigation, Wonho has been officially cleared of all charges. As of April 9, 2020, it was officially announced that Wonho has decided to stay in the K-pop industry and has signed with Highline Entertainment as a solo artist.

CASE 4. Multiple idols—Exploitation

Since I mentioned Grace early, I decided to add a section on her and her investigations (and experiences) as an idol as she exposes the industry.

Grace (rapper)

Korean American rapper Grace was born Kim Eunmi in 1992 in Long Island New York. In 2016, she competed on the third season of the show “Unpretty Rapstar,” which is the popular female oriented spin-off to another K-hip hop-oriented program, Show Me The Money. Although she was eliminated in Episode 8, she eventually went on to debut as a soloist with her songs, “I’m Fine,” “Zombie High,” “Trick or Treat,” and “Because of You.”

She is residing in New York and posting to her YouTube Channel. In one video, she exposes the dark side of the industry such as the ‘pimping out or exploitation’ of idols, including an incident that happened to her. In the video she describes how an unnamed friend was asked by their management to “have dinner” with a woman for \$50,000. Whether or not the woman also knew about the paid exchange is unclear.

Then she goes on to explain the incident that happened to her in which someone she knew asked to spend the night with her in exchange for \$30,000. Obviously, she was freaked out and was wondering if her management had tried to pimp her out.

She goes on to talk about how, if she was not aware that she was being exploited, then other idols (specifically females) probably are not aware either. She worried that if rumors got out that it could ruin her reputation and people would call her a whore. This is not uncommon for mainly female artists who get caught up in prostitution scandals.

Although women are usually the victims of being pimped out , due to how conservative Korea is, as I mentioned earlier in the section about Sulli, many women get harassed by people online, making them out to be the bad guy and calling them sluts or whores.

SOPA Scandal

SOPA, also known as the School of Performing Arts Seoul, is (was) a very prestigious performing arts high school located in Seoul South Korea. It was attended by many idols. Some of its alumnus include, Suzy (Bae Suji) formerly of group Miss A and now a famous actress, Sulli, Jungkook, Seulgi of Red Velvet, Joy (Park Sooyoung) also of Red Velvet and many other successful musicians and actors.

Unfortunately, in 2019, the school became the center of a scandal as the students had decided to expose the dark underbelly of what was happening and what they were being subjected to, these things match what Grace had mentioned in her videos, being pimped out to private parties, and made to perform ‘skinship’ for other people including men in the military.

Skinship is a familiar term within Korean culture and is popular amongst K-pop idols. I mentioned the word before during some of my previous cases as it a common form of ‘fan service’ performed by K-pop idols. This gesture is supposed to be innocent as the definition is “non-sexualized touching between members of the same sex,” and it usually performed by both male and female idols towards their other members. In the case of the SOPA students this act has become non-consensual and one-sided and becomes exploitative. This could also be potentially dangerous for the students who could have faced severe consequences if they disobeyed or refused to participate.

The popular video has been floating around the internet and social media. I found this video through multiple media outlets with English translation (subtitles). All quotes below are sung by the students in the video as they expose the wrongdoings forced upon them by school officials including sexual favors, blackmail, and harassment.

The video opens on a blank dark screen the text that appears reads, “This video was made to give voice to the students.” Then we see a student standing alone in front of a chalk board covered in receipts or evidence posted by students of their accounts, and the attempts at bribery made by the school. The video continuously shifts through students, some show single students, pairs, and even large groups together all wearing their yellow and black school uniforms. Some the lyrics include:

“Being forced to be sexy and have intimate touches with older people.”

“Have the students pay out of pocket for certain ‘performances.’”

“The crime of calling the student body president to your office, trying to bribe him.”

“Not allowing students to talk about the things they’ve been forced to do.”

“Threatening the whistleblowers with direct phone calls.” I am assuming this means threatening messages to their houses or cell phones during off hours.

While this made headlines a few years ago, I have not heard anything about a follow up or anyone being held accountable for what these students are saying. This could also go into the conservative nature of Korea as well as the students being minors and not having any power to actually do anything to make a significant difference.

Viki (Bae Da-eun, former member of Dal Shabet)

In another recent post from the Instagram account THEKTEA, they write about former girl group member Viki, (whose real name is Bae Daeun) of the group Dal Shabet, shared her feelings of being exploited while filming for a movie. According to the post I saw, she had initially asked not to do it, and was told that she would not be showing too much skin, but the director and crew lied to her and secretly filmed more shots that were explicit. She felt like she was alone, because she was still naïve and new to the acting world.

Similar to what Grace talked about, women are treated very harshly in the entertainment world and Viki did not want to be known as a ‘pornographic actress.’

Overall, these cases prove that there is a cultural difference between how artists are treated in the Korean music industry in comparison to here in the West. The Korean music industry is much stricter and heavily influenced by fandom culture and the underlying conservative values.

CHAPTER 4: CONCERT EXPERIENCE

In this chapter I will describe and analyze a K-pop concert experience. I attended the concert with my friend Kelsey, who will interview in the last chapter. Through my analysis of the concert I will go into more detail about fandom culture and consumerism, and more about idols.

My first K-pop concert was in August 2019. My friend and I went to see the boy group Monsta X. Monsta X is a seven member Korean boy group under Starship entertainment, who debuted in 2015. The group was formed through a survival program called No. Mercy and at the time of the concert the group had seven members. In age order they are; Shownu, Wonho, Kihyun, Minhyuk, Hyungwon, Jooheon and I.M.

The day we had finally been waiting for had finally arrived. My job working with children had just ended the day before, and school was starting later in the month, so this was a great way to end my summer. We got on the train to Grand Central, knowing this trip was going to be different from any of the other trips we had taken to New York City as this was our first K-pop concert. We were going to see one of my favorite boy groups, called Monsta X. Not only was this both of our first K-pop concerts it was even more special for my friend as this was the group that got her into the genre.

We finally arrived at Grand Central and hailed a cab to Madison Square Garden. We were immediately overwhelmed by the sight we saw as we pulled up. There were hordes of fans waiting outside the venue. We got out and joined the other fans waiting around outside as K-pop music was blasting in the background. People were doing the dances to different K-pop songs in the middle of the giant crowd of fans. It was amazing to see in real life, as learning choreography to your favorite songs is a huge part of the fandom culture and I had only ever seen people doing these dances online. I think it is definitely one of the things that makes the K-pop community so special and different. I had never seen this type of thing at any other concerts I have been to before. Regardless of age, size, or gender, or dance ability, everyone who wanted to be dancing, was able to join in and do the choreography to their favorite songs without judgment.

Another thing I noticed was how many people had light-sticks with them. A light stick is literally just a plastic object sold as merchandise for fans. One of the major aspects of fandom culture, and obviously also goes back into marketing, consumption, and production within the K-pop industry is fan merchandise and light sticks are one of the most popular items. Usually every popular group gets one made at some point and they are all customized by group and incorporates their fandom name and sometimes specific colors that represents the groups. For example, for the group Blackpink, their colors are black and pink, so the light stick is a black hammer with pink hearts as the paddles on each side. Another example, one that incorporates the fandom name is for a group called Seventeen their fans are called Carats (as in seventeen carat diamonds) and their colors are rose quartz and serenity. So, their light stick called a “carat bong,” is a white stick with a clear plastic circle at the top and inside the circle is a pink (rose colored) diamond sitting on top of a blue (serenity colored) circle. The thing that really intrigued me about seeing the light sticks was not how many people had them, but that some people had the light sticks of other groups and no one seemed to care at all about it. This was interesting to me

because in Korea, liking a certain group is like life or death. Usually being someone who is a 'mutli-group fan' is not as focused on as 'single group fans' are. This is an issue because it is usually obsessive or overprotective fans (not specifically Korean fans) who start drama and fan wars amongst other fan groups, over such small things. Opposed to the artists actually disliking other groups which is not usually the case, because of the harsh life of a trainee many artists and groups actually have respect for each other to some capacity. So, when I saw something as small and simple as people bringing other groups merchandise to the concert of another group, I thought the issue was tied to a cultural difference. Since international fans rarely get to attend concerts, as many groups do not tour the U.S. until a certain level of popularity, issues like this do not really matter to us. K-fans and international fans do tend to clash on many issues surrounding our favorite idols, mostly due to the cultural differences.

Monsta X fandom name is "MONBEBE" which combines the word Monsta X with the French phrase "Mon Cherie." Their lightstick is a black stick with a white (or pink color when it is on because they change colors when synced up at concerts) almost square and diamond shape in the middle. On the inside is their logo which looks like an infinity symbol with straight edges and they are lined up to look almost like a crown shape.

Eventually we moved into the line to get into the venue. We were in line with thousands of other people of all ages, races, and ethnicities all standing outside in the burning hot sun sweating, but excited to get inside. As we waited in line people started coming by to hand things out, some vendors were selling posters, some people were giving out waters, but other fans were handing out banners with lyrics on them, specifically the banners said, 'Beside You,' which was the name of the final song they were going to sing as the closing and then it had lyrics in Korean, Romanized Korean and then the translation of what the lyrics meant. Another girl was giving out little laminated paper hearts with the names of members on it and the date and name of the tour. "WE ARE HERE: TOUR MONSTA X 8.3.19."

When we got into the venue, we followed the stampede of people upstairs to the lobby which was overwhelmingly packed. The excitement was kicking in as we made our way to our seats, they were pretty high up and far away from the stage but luckily there were three huge screens on top of the stage, one in the middle and two on the sides. These screens would be useful throughout the concert as they would add another element of experience to the show by projecting certain lyrics on screen during specific songs or showing close ups of the members at certain times.

The lights went down as the concert was about to begin. The screens in front of us flashed. Red and black, was the aesthetic setting the mood for the first song as well as the intensity of the concert. Images of the boys faces flashed onto the middle screen as the Monsta X logo flashed onto the side screens. The images stopped. The middle screen rose up slightly as the boys, in a cloud of dark smoke began walking forward. Red confetti shot out of a cannon as the boys got into formation for the first song. The music starts for their song "SHOOT OUT." It is an ear shattering sound effect, feeling as if the entire venue was shaking, correlating to the opening choreography of the song in which the members shake very hard to the point where they look like they are vibrating.

Once the song finishes, they start moving into the formation for the next song “HERO” and the aesthetic immediately changes. Suddenly the screens are now white with a huge black X stretching across all three screens. The image stays sprawled across the screen as wavy accent colors of red, green, and blue flash in and out of the screen. This does not change until I.Ms rap solo. The start to his rap is accompanied by a video game sound effect so in turn, the middle screen behind him looks exactly like the start of an old video game the words. “START NEW PLAYER and Insert coin” appear on the screen and then changes to show an eight-bit knight character trying to defeat the bad guys and win stars and coins in a video game. When his solo ends the screens go back to the ‘default’ screen or the original colors they were before.

I suddenly turn to my friend to see her reaction, and she suddenly starts furiously shaking me and shrieking in excitement over her reaction to seeing her favorite member. This was one of the weirdest yet genuine reactions I have ever witnessed in our friendship. One of the things we had discussed several times before, as I was trying to get her into the genre, was that she had never really been into boy bands when she was younger (she is 2 years older than me). She felt like she had missed out on that phase of her life until now, and I was glad I was able to witness such a pure and genuine moment of awe. Looking back at it now, we both realize that getting her into the genre of music was not very difficult as she was already into anime and Japanese culture, so the transition was not such a far stretch. For instance, she was already used to listening to music that was in a different language. The most surprising thing for me was that she was attracted to the heavier more hip-hop sounding songs of Monsta X, as opposed to some of the softer lighthearted and pop-oriented songs of some other groups I showed her before Monsta X. This was because she is into more of pop or cutesy stuff and listens to a lot of music like that but when it came to Monsta X she was attracted to the heavier sound, (to be fair I was the same way but I was happy to learn she too shared the same feelings).

Another common thing within the K-pop fandom culture is to have a bias, or a favorite member in a group. For most people this can change daily, but usually someone picks a bias based on the member that they like the most in terms of looks or personality or it could be someone whose personality most closely resembles their own. For example, my friend's first bias (the member she fawned over) was the one she thought was the ‘most’ handsome but also was the member who is known to have a very meme type of personality. Her current bias is the member who has a very similar personality to her. In that this member is very loud, cheery, and also loves kids as much as my friend does). Whereas, my favorite member of Monsta X is a rapper, whose real personality does not match onstage persona, meaning he has such an innocent looking baby face and is actually scared of everything in real life but on stage he is a savage rapper.

Their onstage performances were so loud and energetic, and high energy in contrast to when they had breaks in their performances. This was when they showed prerecorded ‘skits’ or conceptual videos projected on the screens or they talked with the audience.

The lights in the venue went down and everyone finally took their seats which gave us time to relax from all the jumping and screaming we did. Then the only light that shined through came from the screens in front of us. The first video we saw was a conceptual video showing us the theme of the album. For example, the concept of the video was the seven deadly sins, so they showed us a video where each member portrayed a different sin, and all their stories intertwined.

They also left a lot of it up to interpretation which allows fans to come up with their own theories. This is another trend amongst the K-pop fandom and adds another layer of fan participation.

The next series of videos were much more lighthearted and fun. It showed each of the members in a mock YouTube (MONTUBE) series of videos in which each segment played into their stage personas. For instance, within K-pop groups it is common for certain members to have a certain position the group or acquire one or more nicknames that associate with their personality. There are the basic positions such as leader, eldest member, rapper, vocalist, visual, and maknae (youngest member). Then there are nicknames that members usually acquire, for instance in Monsta X, Wonho is known for being muscular but also having a soft personality so his nickname is 'muscle bunny.' Another member Jooheon frequently goes by the nickname 'Honey' as a play on words to his actual name but also because he has a very soft and cute personality.

So, the MONTUBE videos starts with member Minhyuk whose video segment is about makeup, parodying the beauty guru videos seen all over the internet. Due to his facial features he has been given the nickname 'flower boy' which is a term used in Korea often used to describe a pretty, or feminine looking man. The website Beyond Hallyu breaks down the history of the word. "Being used to refer to delicate, slightly feminine looking boys." The article also addresses the controversy that comes along with this nickname which is the idea that men given this title are not as masculine.

In comparison to the Korean view of masculinity an article posted by HuffPost explains how these views of masculinity or absence of translates into western culture. Japanese American DJ and producer Steve Aoki shares his thoughts on this issue as he has become a collaborator with two male groups, Monsta X and BTS who are both becoming well known over here. Aoki says, "K-pop challenges the stereotypical Western idea of masculinity without being political about it." The author Kimberly Yam, agrees with this sentiment and adds in her own thoughts, "Indeed the genre's ability to traverse cultures and hemispheres while continuing to gain momentum has been a pleasant surprise, considering how Asians, particularly Asian men, have been traditionally branded as sexless, undesirable, and effeminate in Western entertainment spaces" (Yam 2019).

The next segment is Shownu he is sat in front of a table full of fried chicken. He is doing an ASMR MUKBANG which are two popular video trends on YouTube. Mukbangs have become very popular of YouTube but originate in Korea. A mukbang is an online eating show usually hosted by one person, it could either be live or prerecorded and involves someone eating food while answering questions or talking to an online audience. Shownu combined a mukbang with ASMR, which is another popular YouTube trend involving sensory responses. He bites into the fried chicken close to the microphone so the audience can hear the crunch.

Next, we have Wonho whose segment takes place in a gym showing some simple work out techniques using dumbbells. As I mentioned before his nickname is 'muscle bunny' so this concept is fitting for him. Then we have Jooheon, whose nickname Honey, shows him in a kitchen doing a cooking video. He is making a burrito with honey added in it. In I.Ms video he

analyzes some of the English rap lyrics he has written for the group. He was given a language segment because he is the only member who has lived overseas. This connects his stage persona and his personal life. Then we have Kihyun whose segment revolves around him making coffee. I am not sure why they chose for him to make coffee, other than the fact that I he likes to drink it. Hyungwon was the last member and his segment was fashion oriented as he is the tall model like 'visual' of the group.

During another break they also took time to talk banter and play games with each other. In one instance some of the members challenged each other to a bottle flipping competition. This is another trend that has become popular amongst internet culture and is easy enough for them to do on stage. Whenever groups play games like this there are usually punishments for the losers. Since this was a concert the go to 'punishment' for the members would be to do something for the audience. This would usually be 'aegyo,' which is a popular Korean term that has become known amongst Hallyu fans. A definition I found for the word, is 'ae' meaning to 'love' or to 'like,' in this case affection, with 'gyo' meaning to be 'seductive,' 'coquettish,' or 'loveable.' Thus, 'Aegyo' implies projecting affection and cuteness in a seductive way.

The concert ended with their song Beside You, which is more of a slower ballad type song. This was the song we all knew they were going to perform and had received banners for while we waited outside before the show started. These banners had the Korean lyrics as well as a translation of what they meant. Then they did an encore stage with a "surprise" guest. "DJ H.ONE" which was actually just Hyungwon DJing. This was a nice surprise and got everyone jumping again as opposed to the slower song beforehand which allowed everyone to sway and share in a beautiful moment together.

In their closing statements each member had prepared something to say as a special goodbye greeting, and many of them had rehearsed statements in English although they do not speak the language. One of the most intriguing moments of the closing remarks was actually said by I.M who was the last to speak. In his remarks he said, "there are a lot of preconceptions about K-pop. [That] K-pop is kind of like a fad. 'Why do you guys like it? You don't even speak the language?' Well none of us [Monsta X] are born in the U.S. We are all Korean, I know that we are not really good at English. BUT I believe music is another language. So, if we feel the same, we are the same. If this K-pop is a bad thing let us, make them (haters) shut up!"

Reflecting back on this moment, and with everything that has happened to Monsta X since then including the cyberbullying and scandals, I think I.Ms words add to the growing awareness of the hate or discrimination that comes with being a fan of something seen as exotic or foreign. While Monsta X were accepting an award earlier this year I.M said, "I know there are a lot of haters out there but let the haters bark and let us keep grinding and hustling and growing together." Even these K-pop artists or groups are aware of the stereotypes that come with being a fan of something that is not considered to be mainstream, but through their music Monsta X are still able to relate to their international fans through their music and their message. Especially for I.M, although he is Korean, he has a connection to the West that the other members do not have and therefore is able to relate to and understand a foreign audience better.

CHAPTER 5: VIDEO ANALYSIS

In this chapter I will be analyzing three K-pop videos as well as the artists behind them. First, I will start with PSY, and talk about how his music really broke into Western popular culture in 2012, along with him being an ‘unusual’ idol. Next, I will focus on a song by JYP to examine on how the male and female gaze are respectively utilized in K-pop. Finally, I will analyze a video by BTS who are massively popular globally. They are responsible for the most recent popularization of the genre and are breaking records and barriers in the global pop music industry.

Kangnam Beauty: PSY

The first person and video I will be analyzing is PSY, who is responsible for the 2012, wave of Korean music popularity with his hit Gangnam Style. Citing the previous NPR article in chapter 2, “How the South Korean Government Made K-pop a Thing,” there is also a section about PSY and his impact on the global market. “Back in 2012, K-pop became a noted force in 2012 when the rapper PSY’s video and song “Gangnam Style” went viral.” The article goes on to explain how unusual PSY’s popularity is stating that he is not the normal “Korean idol.” Euny Hong, journalist and author of the *The British of Korean Cool* (2006) states that, “PSY is not much like other successful K-pop stars: he is short, overweight and traffics in irony. And that irony, Hong points out in her book signaled South Korea’s ‘final stage in modern evolution’ (NPR citing Hong 2015).”

In a similar article published by The New York Times titled, “*Can K-pop Conquer America?*” PSY is also mentioned and credited for really bringing K-pop into the West in 2012, but the uniqueness of PSY’s character is emphasized, because it is unusual amongst the K-pop world. “A lot of K-pop fans would argue that doesn’t exactly represent the K-pop world in general, but that was a huge breakout moment in terms of the last five years,” said the author about PSY’s Gangnam Style (NYTimes 2017).

Through Wikipedia I was able to find the statistics of how popular the song became. “The music video went viral in August 2012 and have influenced popular culture worldwide. “Gangnam Style” received mixed reviews, with praise for its catchy beat and PSY’s amusing dancing (which has itself become a phenomenon) in the music video and during live performances in various locations around the world. In September 2012, “Gangnam Style” was recognized by Guinness World Records as the most “liked” video on YouTube. It subsequently won Best Video at the MTV Europe Music Awards held that year. It became a source of parodies and reaction videos by many different individuals, groups and organizations.”

Gangnam Style is not a typical K-pop song, and PSY does not fit the typical idol mold. The song and video for Gangnam Style is funny, with memorable lyrics, accompanied by catchy and easy dance moves, which is probably part of the reason it gained so much international success.

In the video we see PSY being fanned by a beautiful woman, but then it cuts to reality. He is sat on a beach in a beach chair lounging in a nice shirt, pink shorts, and sunglasses. Then in the next scene we see him up, walking into a horse stable in a black suit, and sunglasses. For the next lyrics it quickly cuts back and forth between him on the beach and him in the stable. And while he is on the beach, he is laying on a beach chair while a ‘mini PSY’ (a child dressed up to look like PSY) dances in front of him.

Then the video cuts to him walking in the middle of two females as trash is being blown around in the streets.

The idea that PSY can be successful like any other K-pop idol even though he does not fit the standard, contrasts with the idea of what it means to be an idol. It breaks the ‘norm’ of what goes into being a K-pop idol as PSY is an older man, overweight, and sings very comedic songs. Although he does not fit the “young, skinny, sexy” standard of most idols his success does play into another topic within Korean entertainment; the idea that if you are overweight or older you have to be funny. This is a common theme within Korean media and on many variety programs we see this trope played out.

The song Gangnam Style (also stylized as Kangnam) is a parody of the stereotypical Korean beauty standards. According to Wikipedia the phrase “Gangnam Style” is in reference to the high class and rich society presented by the Gangnam district in Seoul. One of the frequently repeated lyrics in the song is “Oppa Gangnam Style.” To accompany the lyrics PSY wears nice suits and sunglasses but makes fun of this high standard with the silly choreography.

Since the release of this song years ago, many other shows and media have emerged about Gangnam and this crazy idea of “being a Gangnam beauty” which is a very rich part of Seoul and known for women who get plastic surgery. The 2019 K-drama “MY I.D. is Gangnam Beauty,” combats these beauty standards as the main character feels like she is so ugly that she gets plastic surgery, which is very common for females in Korean society. Especially for female idols, who in turn still usually get criticized for it. This is exactly what happens to the female lead of the show, even after her surgeries the main character still gets made fun of and is called ‘a Gangnam beauty’ as an insult because of how fake she looks. The show was praised for challenging the ideas of beauty in modern Korean society.

Shake That Booty: JYP

Another solo artist responsible for the popularity of K-pop is J.Y.P. He is one of many artists responsible for popularizing the genre within Korea in the 90s. Professionally known as JYP, or J.Y. Park, Park Jinyoung founder and CEO of JYP Entertainment the third largest entertainment company in Korea. He is in charge of managing and overseeing the groups and artists signed with his label, but he also continues to produce his own solo music. In 2015 he realized a song called “Who’s Your Mama?” (Featuring Jessi). The music, performance, and choreography are enjoyable and catchy, and he has stated that the song is meant to parody western songs the lyrics, the controversy of this song comes from the music video.

The music video opens in a gym setting. We see many slender females working out on different equipment, including a bunch of women on a row of treadmills. JYP appears and starts working out on the treadmill next to one of the women. The lyrics begin as JYP stares at the woman's butt and asks the woman what her measurements are:

“What is your waist size?” “24.” “Hip?” “34.”

In the next scene JYP is seen in front of an orange background and the girls are seen walking around in bikinis or bathing suits, supposed to resemble a beach scene. When they are doing the choreography or performance section of the video the scenes cut back and forth between the gym setting where JYP and the females are joined by male dancers as well, or the ‘beach scene,’ where JYP and the other males are wearing suits meanwhile the females are all in crop tops and tight spandex shorts.

All this is accompanied by the repetitive lyrics; “shake that booty, that booty booty.”

The reason I chose to focus on this music video of JYPs, as opposed to any of his other songs is because I think this song is controversial enough to represent both the male gaze as well as the female gaze. The female gaze is very common amongst K-pop fans and fan culture in general. It is the over sexualization or fetishization of men, which is rarely talked about. While his music video does not represent the female gaze, the comment section of his music video does share both views of the female and male gaze.

The comments section had mixed reactions to the music video and the lyrics of the song. Some people found the whole video to be unsettling and took the context of the video seriously. Stating that even if the song was meant to be funny and parody western music, the creepy behavior displayed by JYP of him checking out women and asking for their measurements should not be acceptable anywhere. On the contrary, other people did not take the video so seriously, as they just liked that the song was supposed to parody western artists. Some also decided to combat the critics by saying that even if the women in video are being sexualized that they are actors and are getting paid to be there.

Meanwhile some commenters actually decided to criticize the women in the video, where were already being sexualized in the video. The actresses in the music video were all slender women who fit the ideal beauty standards in Korea, yet some of the comments decided to judge them for their bodies. For example, one specific comment I saw was someone saying that for a song about booty, these women did not have much, when in reality it is just a cultural preference.

In her article “Queering Spectatorship in K-POP,” Chuyun Oh explains the phenomenon and frequent occurrence of male K-pop idols getting partially naked during concerts or dance practices and how these actions affect their mostly female fans. A major part of the marketing in K-pop is due to the fans and directed at females or young girls. Fandom culture is very important and the idea of ‘skinship’ is just an added layer and duty that comes along with being an idol. This article is not only helpful by posing the term ‘female gaze’ in comparison to the ‘male gaze’ as seen in JYPs video from above, but also adds to the explanation of this phenomenon. Her article describes the difference between male and female K-pop fans, stating that female fans tend to think and make deeper connections with their favorite male idols some even going as far

as calling them “oppa,” which is the Korean word for older brother but in relation to K-pop music and stardom has also become a term of endearment towards male idols (Oh 2015).

When an artist or group perform dances, it can be a very gender biased thing. For instance, if a male or female group covers a song done by the opposite gender, they usually get more praise for their skills. The YouTube video titled “Boy Groups and Girl Groups Change songs- K-pop Duality,” shows the clear differences in the performances and gender bias which supports the idea of the “female gaze.” As defined above, and also explaining that many K-pop fans tend to be female this also plays into the complex issues of gender which I have discussed earlier. In many cases, and as the video shows we see the differences between how male groups cover female songs and how females cover male songs. Male groups are able to sing sexy female songs or cute female songs, and still be respected by their female fans. Some groups even go so far as to wear ‘drag’ and dress up as females during specific female songs. While female groups tend to get criticized or overly sexualized and then told to cover up, whenever they want to show more skin during their concerts or when covering male songs.

International “Playboys:” BTS

Lastly, I will be analyzing the group BTS. I have chosen BTS for several reasons. First, they have broken into the Western mainstream of music; second, they are known for having many factors of what makes a K-pop group appealing. For instance, they have a loyal fanbase, unique concepts and videos, are not afraid to discuss social issues within their music and very genuine despite their growing success. Overall, there are also other influential K-pop groups and artists, I think as of the ‘newest’ generation and era of K-pop, BTS has definitely had the most success and become the most influential. I will discuss their history from their debut until now and some of their videos analyzing some of what makes K-pop and groups appealing such things are listed by the Odyssey online; “concepts, lyrics, performances, choreography (Odom 16 Oct 2019).”

BTS, also known as Bangtan Soyeondan (or Bulletproof Boy Scouts or most recently Beyond the Scene) is a seven-member group of all Korean members, who debuted in 2013 under a small company called BigHit Entertainment. Recently, due to their [BTS] continuing success BigHit Entertainment has broken the barrier of ‘the top three’ major labels in Korea and has now become the fourth most popular entertainment company in Korea. They have recently moved into a larger building and have also been able to obtain smaller companies underneath them. BTS is the classic underdog story. The ages of the members range from the eldest being 28 and the youngest being 22. The members from eldest to youngest are Jin, Suga, RM, J-Hope, Jimin, V, and Jungkook.

Out of seven members, four of them go by stage names, one member goes by a shortened version of his real name, and only two go by their given names. This ties back into Chapter 1 and the importance of a name in terms of translation and global branding appeal. For example, the leader of the group RM whose real name is Kim Namjoon, formerly went by the stage name Rap Monster. He was one of the first members I learned about, outside of the group as a whole. When I initially saw his name, I was confused and had two thoughts; ‘why would he call himself that?’ ‘and he must be good at rapping.’ I was right. His name obviously reflected his talents, but only

recently did he shorten his name to RM to sound more professional. Another member goes by the stage name V, (real name is Kim Taehyung) and his name stood out to me the most because I have a special connection and fondness for the letter. As I mentioned in the introduction my name was originally supposed to start with the letter “V”, but my parents moved Vivian to my middle name and as a child I used to think about how if I was ever going to have a stage name of a fake name it would incorporate my middle name or initial. This not only connects to chapter 1 through being appealing, it connects to me as a fan on a personal level.

Even stage names can be a formation of identity for an artist. For example, Suga, whose real name is Min Yoongi has ‘two’ stage names. He performs under the stage name Suga when he is with BTS and releasing music with them, but for his solo albums he prefers to go by the name ‘Agust D’ which stands for “Daegu Town Suga” meaning the area he grew up in and his BTS stage name. This also relates back to chapter 1, in that both of his stage names hold personal meaning to him.

It is interesting that BTS have gained international success without having a foreign or exotic member, this exposes the MTV article that claims, part of the appeal and success of many groups was the implementation of a foreign member who can either speak English or another language or just had a very exotic look. In fact, RM does speak fluent English because he taught himself and has publicly shared the story of how he learned English on interviews and talk shows that he learned by watching the television show Friends. This is an example of how western culture and media has been influential within Korean society for years, and now we with the growth of K-pop and Korean media we are seeing a reversal.

Another reason for BTS’ and K-pops growing success is the consumption of content through the internet and social media. It (social media) has become a major influence in the intake of foreign media. For the past three years in a row BTS has won Billboard Music Awards and two years in a row they won the award for “Top Social Artist,” which was basically an award for their social media presence and their loyal fandom called ARMY.

Since discovering K-pop I now realize the importance of social media presence and the interactions between fans and artists. I think that the relationship established by Korean artists and their fans is much closer compared to Western artists, and I am definitely starting to notice how even now western entertainment and culture seems to be borrowing from the Korean media industry. For example, the ‘e-boy’ and ‘e-girl’ trends and styles that have become popular and are supposed to be the ‘new wave of emo or scene kids’ borrows most of its style from K-pop idol style. “Fancams” (fan filmed video of artists usually at a live event) are another trend on Twitter that originally came from K-pop fans. Huge fights and trending topics involving K-pop fans occur almost daily, due to the fact that some fans spam these fancams on unrelated posts. Recently the hashtag “fancamsareoverparty” was trending on Twitter as a way to combat this issue, but unfortunately, I do not think it will stop the problem.

Combining concepts, lyrics, performance, choreography, are part of what makes K-pop successful and what makes artists or groups appealing. For BTS, one of the major reasons they stand out compared to other groups is that their music really is not afraid to cover tough subjects. While they do have songs about love, they do not shy away from other teenage issues or social

issues. Many of their songs focus on youth, particularly their “Most Beautiful Moment in Life series.” Some of the other messages in their songs deal with body issues, mental health, and abuse. They are also not afraid to make songs calling out the problems within their government with songs like Baepsae (Silver spoon/Crow Tit) or Am I Wrong. Recently, as their popularity has become global many of their songs focus on their success and unapologetically calling out the critics with such songs like “Mic Drop” and “ON.”

BTS have the distinct honor of being the first K-pop group invited to speak at the United Nations. This took place in 2018 while they were promoting their “Love Yourself albums” in conjunction with their “Love Yourself campaign” which partnered with UNICEF the same year. The campaign was launched to promote self-love and in turn using that self-love to help others. This action alone emphasizes why BTS is an important group for the history of K-pop they not only ambassadors for South Korean artists but other Asian artists too.

Connecting the song to the music video is an important visual and storytelling aspect of K-pop and BTS has been able to blend and change styles so effortlessly, allowing their fans to fully engage with the concepts and theorize together. Their recent song “Black Swan” which was a single for their most recent album Map of the Soul 7 was a contemporary concept. Fans speculated that the song and lyrics were a nod to the ballet of the same name. This was confirmed when they released the first of two videos for the song. The first video was a performance video presented by the MN Dance company. This video was released in January, two months before BTS released their official music video. The world premium television performance of this song took place on the Late Late show (LLS) with James Corden on January 29, 2020. BTS had already made appearances on LLS a few times before this and not only was this a great marketing and promotional technique it preaches to how successful they are that an American late-night show has had them on multiple times.

The song I have chosen to analyze is Spring Day. The music video was released on February 12, 2017. The song was part of a BTS special repackaged album titled You Never Walk Alone. This album follows the Wings album and series, which was another era of interconnected storylines. The theme of these two albums followed BTS’ usual guideline of youth, standing up for what you believe in, and talking openly about mental health. This song is highly praised as one of BTS best and most thoughtful songs and has been continuously on Korean music charts since its original release. Although never publicly stated by BTS, the lyrics of the song and the video itself are unmistakably in tribute of the Sewol Ferry tragedy that occurred a few years ago.

The Sewol ferry disaster occurred on April 16, 2014 when a ferry boat heading from Itaewon to Jeju island capsized in the middle of the water. On board the boat were numerous passengers but most notably were high school students. 250 students died on the boat while it sank. In the wake of the tragedy fans and idols have publicly shared their outrage at how the Korean government handled the situation. Since 2014, many artists have also written songs in tribute to the lives lost on that day.

The opening of the video is set in winter and we see V alone at an abandoned train station. He walks out to the rails and puts his head down to listen to the train coming. Then we see Jungkook sitting in the train looking out the window. Then the video shifts to Jimin sitting

alone on a beach. Just as the lyrics start, we see RM standing inside the train. *“I miss you, saying this makes me miss you even more,”* he sings. *“Miss you, even though I am looking at your photo. Time is so cruel. I hate us.”*

As a common theme with BTS, this video cuts between individual moments of the members and group scenes. For this video in particular, seeing the members together could represent how the students used to be happy together before the tragedy. There is a scene in which all the members except for Jin are on different levels of a staircase, Jin is at the bottom looking up and his hands look like a camera. Fans think he is meant to represent the students who are no longer alive and Jin represents them by being separated from the other members.

One of the most significant moments of the video, is during Suga’s rap solo. Upon first watch it might seem odd but once you connect it with the Sewol tragedy it becomes a haunting reminder of that fateful day. We see Suga sat in a mountain of laundry, symbolizing the clothes of the students who died on the ferry. He sings the lyrics *“Yes I hate you, you left me, but I never stopped thinking about you not even a day. Honestly, I miss you, but I’ll erase you because it hurts less than to blame you.”*

After Suga’s solo the song enters another verse and then goes back to the chorus in which Jungkook sings *“I miss you, I miss you.”* Then we see him running alone, through the train, the hotel, the laundry mat set, in search of his friends. Finally, he is reunited with them and they all start running together. The song continues as they run, and then V sings the only English lyrics in the song *“You know it all, you’re my best friend.”* Then he goes back to Korean with the lyrics, *“The morning will come again.”*

The music video ends with a beautifully heartbreaking image: a pair of tennis shoes hanging from a tree. Earlier in the video, Jimin is by himself at the beach, and then he receives the shoes from the tide. Just before the video ends, we see him holding them. Just like the pile of clothes, these shoes could represent the lost souls, the lost innocence, but the shoes hanging from a tree is very childlike and definitely symbolizes youth.

This song is meant for remembrance as well as being a social commentary and constant reminder of how the Korean government did not take proper action and are responsible for the deaths of 250 students. BTS have never been afraid to call out injustice even in a conservative society that values respect. Something that stands out in the song to me, is that there is only one English line in the entire song. I mentioned in chapter 1 that when I was getting into the genre, I noticed that songs often had key words or phrases that were in English as a way to appeal to a foreign audience. Spring Day only has the line that V sings in English. This not only represents how powerful the message of the song is that despite its lack of English, foreign fans still know what it is about and understand the importance of the song but it also represents BTS’ impact as a Korean group with international success, to be able to sing about a Korean tragedy and still have international fans resonate with it.

BTS has been able to find a balance between maintaining an international image to appeal to western fans, while also flaunting their ‘Korea-ness and Asian culture.’ In 2018 BTS released a song called IDOL in which they call out people who hate on them for being idols, and

the video shows scenes in which they promote their culture and demonstrate that they are still connected to their Korean side. This is an interesting development for BTS especially as a group who originally came from a very small entertainment company. In comparison to BTS I remember listening the song Arario by Topp Dogg which originally came out in 2014. The entire video promotes Korean culture but at the time Topp Dogg had faced backlash as people thought it was exploitative. After reading the comment section of their video, people agree that if the video had been released in 2019 it would have been successful just like BTS'. This goes back to the theme of luck. Both groups debuted in 2013, both came from small companies, but unfortunately only one group gained international stardom. (Ironically, that was the name of the company that Topp Dogg was with until the company merged). Coincidentally, BTS is signed with BigHit entertainment and they have become a 'big hit' both within Korea and globally. As a fan of both groups this is a fascinating contrast to look at. This relates back to Cedarbough Saeji's work in which she talks about how the government worried about young people's lack of connection with their culture. These K-pop artists not only encourage and promote their culture towards their young Korean fans, but they are also promoting their culture for foreigners which adds a layer of exoticism and in turn, helps promote tourism.

CHAPTER 6: INTERVIEWS AND FANDOM

In this chapter I will be analyzing 3 interviews I did with K-pop fans. Some of the questions I asked were in regard to how and why they got into the genre, what it means to them, and what about this genre and fandom stands out from western culture. I will be tying these back to my personal fan experience as well as fandom culture as a whole and relating back to the chapters above.

CASE 1. Oliva

It was the first day of my new class, and the new Spring semester and I noticed a girl walk into the classroom with BTS (BT21) character keychains on her backpack. I was immediately interested in talking to her for my project, wondering how she got into K-pop and what it means to her. After class I asked her if she would like to be interviewed and so we headed to the library and began discussing our mutual love of BTS and K-pop in general.

Her name was Olivia.

As we walked, she asked me if I had a bias or a favorite member to which I said yes and told her who my favorite was. “I don’t have one that’s why I have almost all the keychains.” As mentioned in the concert section I bias is our favorite member in a group and for some people this can change daily or remain the same continuously. This is where some issues with fandom culture arise. I see this a lot on the internet through various social media outlets where being intensely loyal to a bias can become toxic and cause fandoms to break down. This falls into the idea presented in John Fiske’s work about fandom culture. In the section “Discrimination and Distinction” Fiske says, “fans discriminate fiercely: the boundaries between what falls within their fandom and what does not are sharply drawn. And this discrimination in cultural sphere is mapped into distinctions in the social—the boundaries between the community of fans and the rest of the world (1992: 34).” Unfortunately, this has become a major issue amongst ARMY (BTS fans) especially as their popularity becomes global, so do the toxic fans.

Eventually we sat down in the library and I asked her how and when she got into K-pop. “I got into K-pop through my friend, and that it was around 2016-17. I got into BTS in after seeing them perform at the AMA (American Music Awards).”

She proceeded to tell me that she used to be the friend that, although she did not personally like the music at the time she allowed her other friend to listen to it, which also sounded familiar to me because that is what my non-K-pop friends do with me.

Eventually I asked her why she liked BTS so much and what they meant to her and she shared that their music really helped her through a hard time in her life. She explained that they were a form of ‘escapism.’

CASE 2. Yovana

The next person I interviewed was actually Olivia's "K-pop friend" or the girl that got her into the genre, Yovana. I thought this would be interesting to hear Yovana's own experience of getting K-pop, as well as their shared love of the genre. The first question I asked was how and when she discovered K-pop and her answer was actually very similar to mine.

"I discovered K-pop actually through watching a BuzzFeed video, and through YouTube. The first group that I officially heard was EXO. This was 2015." Then she told me about how in the summer of 2016, although still fairly new to the genre she liked it and started attending events like KCON NEW YORK.

Then I asked her what she thought are some of the important cultural differences between Western artists and Korean artists. We started to discuss how conservative the country is compared to the U.S. and that some of the restrictions put on Korean idols seem to be way stricter than with western artists.

"The marijuana scandals." Is one of the specific issues we discussed.

Smoking weed is one of the most restricted and controversial issues in Korea and especially for idols it is a big deal. Recently three idols, all from the same company, have faced prison time and severe consequences for being linked to marijuana use. "G. Dragon, T.O.P. and B.I." All three of them are artists under Y.G. Entertainment have faced major backlash from fans due to their marijuana use. While G.D. and T.O.P. have both served their jail time and court sentences, they have been able to renew their contracts with Y.G. entertainment for the coming year. Meanwhile, B.I. the former leader of boy group IKON who is also younger than both G.D. and T.O.P. (and therefore probably holds less status) was immediately fired after texts were leaked of him reaching out to a friend thinking about trying weed. He was recently subjected to drug tests from the company, all of which came back negative, and yet he was still fired from his job.

"I definitely think issues like this are handled much better here in the states. Marijuana is basically a non-issue here as most artists smoke and talk about or promote smoking in songs."

Another scandal we talked about was dating scandals and the pressures women in K-pop face. "The Hyuna scandal and Hyuna and E'Dawn."

These two artists are also both formerly from the same company, Cube Entertainment and they were both fired once they admitted that they were dating. This came after backlash from mostly Korean fans, which we discussed is a huge cultural difference. Hyuna was one of the biggest artists at Cube Entertainment, having been in a girl group for seven years while also maintaining a career as a solo artist.

Meanwhile, E'Dawn had just recently debuted in a ten-member boy band but Korean fans demanded that he be kicked out after the scandal. This news is even more heartbreaking because he had originally been part of a survival program, but the leader of their group had begged the

company to keep all ten members instead of eliminating anyone.

Similar to what I said above in Olivia's section, and the quote I used from Fiske shows the international divide within fandom culture. Adding to the topic of discrimination is Fiske's suggestion that "this popular discrimination involves the selection of texts or stars that offer fans opportunities to make meanings of their social identities and social experiences that are self-interested and functional (1992: 35)." This could also fall into Fisk's category of production and participation from a fandom perspective.

Unfortunately, this is how many native Korean fans (or some fans in general) react when it comes to fandom culture. As discussed through Chuyun' Oh's work in the previous chapter, there is an idea of possessiveness or ownership that comes with being a female fan (2015). The minute a male idol is off the market, a female fans loyalty to them is immediately shattered.

CASE 3. Kelsey

The last person I interviewed was my friend Kelsey. Although I was the one who was originally into the genre, I urged her to listen to it because I knew she would like it. Eventually she took my advice, and in turn she has had her own unique experience with K-pop as well as shared experiences of going to concerts together, but even so, she has her own feelings within those moments.

"When did you officially get into K-pop aside from me telling you about it?" Was the first question I asked her when she sat down with me. "I *officially*, started listening to K-pop in late May of 2019." She said.

I followed up with which K-pop group did she first listen to, or what was the group that got her into the genre. "Monsta X." "I remember you showing me Monsta X and the song that really caught my attention was Dramarama, from there I started listening to it more on my own and slowly ventured into their other songs."

"What K-pop groups do you currently listen to now?"

"Monsta X, Seventeen and BTS, are the main groups I listen to."

"What were your initial thoughts of the genre and what finally interested you into listening?"

"I liked the fast pace hip hop sound of Monsta X in comparison to the other groups you tried to show me before. That was really what drew me in and convinced me to start listening to KPOP."

"Did you have any reservations when first getting into the genre?" I asked wondering if she had any of the same or similar feelings as I did when I was first getting into the music genre. "Yes."

“I had felt like an “OLD WHITE MOM.” She said, because she is two years older than me. “My hesitation with the genre, which I’ve come to learn is a common mistake other fans go through, was about learning all the members. I did not want to come across as insensitive or racist, because I could not tell them apart right away.” I added that I had the same problem when I first started learning about the members and still sometimes mix up members in my favorite groups. This mistake is quite common as members and groups frequently change their styles, concepts, and hair colors.

Next, I asked if listening to the music helped her learn about the culture or more K-media. “Yes.” “Eventually through the music, and listening to it on YouTube, I started getting more into the fan related content.” Some examples of fan made content YouTube includes videos like ‘BTS funny moments compilation’ or ‘An unhelpful guide to Seventeen.’ Included in fan directed content is lyric videos or fan cams often created by fans. These also help newer fans familiarize themselves with the members.

“I slowly started learning more about variety shows which are very popular in Korea, and many groups actually have their own variety programs.” Such as Run! BTS, and Going Seventeen. Artists also post music videos and do livestreams on apps live V Live which is a popular live streaming app used by many K-pop and groups.

“In terms of music the [Korean] industry is NOT all that different [to the western industry].” She said after I asked what she thinks about both industries and how they compare to each other.

“Both industries still mass produce content, merchandise, and focus on marketing and money, as well as how artists also generally also have similar song I topics whether they are Korean or not. Things like love, hatred, heartbreak, money.”

“Where it [the industries] differ is the fandom culture.” She says.

“The fandom culture for K-pop is way more extreme and the K-industry really is marketed towards fans. Especially at concerts is when you see the major differences. At western concerts I have been too we do not get as much fan made content, whereas at K-pop concerts there are fans handing out banners, and goodies. There is so much more interaction and camaraderie between fans at K-pop concerts then you would see at other concerts.”

“Is there anything that you learned from the culture/cultural differences that surprised you or that you were not aware of before?”

“Yeah the age and seniority culture that they have in South Korea. We don’t really have or do that here in the states.” This goes along with the conservative nature of Korea in which they are very respectful and have a hierarchy of command and respect. Specifically, in the music industry they also have honorifics such as “sunbaenim” which means senior and “hoobae” which means junior.

This interview falls into the category of “Cultural Accumulation” in Fiske’s work. In it he says that “the accumulation of knowledge is fundamental to the accumulation of cultural capital. The cultural industries have of course, recognized this and produce an enormous range of material designed to give the fan access to information about the object of fandom (1992: 42).” This is very true for K-pop as part of the marketing towards international fans is making it easily accessible, with things like lyric and performance videos it allows foreign fans to better connect with the material. Fiske also says, “fan culture knowledge differs from official cultural knowledge in that it is used to enhance the fans power over, and participation in the original industrial text (1992: 43).” He uses *Rocky Horror* fans as an example of this, stating that it is customary for them to know the entire dialogue of the film but to also be able to shape the dialogue and customize certain aspects of the show in their own way. Coincidentally, Kelsey is a huge fan of *Rocky Horror* and this is what happens during live events. She is able to quote the entire movie but still has trouble with K-pop related things, such as identifying members or groups or songs.

CONCLUSION: Reflections and What I Have Learned

The point of this project has been to examine why K-pop has become so popular within western culture and understand how fandom culture plays a huge role in this case. Through doing this project I have learned so much about the intricacies of being a K-pop idol and how much of a mental and physical struggle these artists actually go through for one chance at fame. One of the most notable things I discovered was that these pressures stem from a conservative society and many of the issues these K-pop artists face would be handled differently if they were in the west. While being a fan from the west, I am outraged by some of the hatred towards these artists, but I also think that the immense pressure placed on these artists allows for a better connection with fans. K-pop fans are very loyal and supportive and no matter where we are from, we all want our favorite groups or artists to be successful. Although fandoms tend to fight, it is important that they get along to combat issues of racism and gender bias that still exist within many countries.

I end by returning to my definition of diaspora via Braziel and Mannir's work on that topic. Diaspora is the ongoing and changing negotiated experiences of a minority group, as it functions on a larger scale in relation to mainstream society, which aims to negate that very diasporic experience. K-pop helps Asian Americans living in the U.S. stay connected to their culture, but also participate in a new kind of global culture that blurs conventional boundaries like 'East' and 'West.' While I am not Korean American, K-pop has allowed POC fans like me from different backgrounds, to connect to a feeling of diaspora in a way that is not only enjoyable but meaningful.

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8. *Beyond Hallyu*. “Just a Pretty Face? The Long, Little Known History of Korean Flower Boys.” 11 Feb. 2015. beyondhallyu.com/k-pop/just-pretty-face-long-little-known-history-korean-flower-boys/. I used this in the section about Minhyuk from Monsta X, in which I refer to him as a “flower boy,” which is a common term in Korean culture referencing a male who seems to have feminine or pretty features.
9. DareDB K-pop April 28, 2019 “*Defining K-pop Generations*.” Youtube.com <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ay3Dj24uZvM&t=472s> I found this channel by searching up the term “K-pop generations.” It is a very complex topic, as many people might have different opinions, but this channel lays out an easily understandable and logical timeline.
10. *Grunge.com*. Benjamin, Kathy. “The Disturbing Truth behind K-Pop Music.”, Grunge, 1 Dec. 2017, www.grunge.com/92002/disturbing-truth-behind-k-pop-music/. Another article about the dark side of K-pop and how the trainee process for becoming an idol causes both mental and physical distress. Mainly, most female idols go through some diet restrictions.
11. *HuffPost.com* Yam, Kimberly. “Steve Aoki: K-Pop Bands Show Masculinity Is A Fluid Concept.” HuffPost, 22 Mar. 2019. www.huffpost.com/entry/steve-aoki-k-pop-bands-show-masculinity-is-a-fluid-concept_n_5c93ef10e4b01ebee0cab4a. This article on focusing on the idea of masculinity in K-pop. Japanese American DJ and music producer Steve Aoki shares his thoughts on this topic as he has become a collaborator of many K-pop groups such as BTS, and Monsta X, whom he mentions in the article. He describes how K-pop challenges the idea of masculinity but does so

- in a way that is not political. I used this in the concert chapter in relation to Minhyuk's parody YouTube video where he does a makeup tutorial.
12. *Irish Examiner* "How South Korean Boy Band BTS Became a K-Pop Hit by Fighting for Social Rights.", Irishexaminer.com, 13 June 2018, www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/entertainment/how-south-korean-boy-band-bts-became-a-k-pop-hit-by-fighting-for-social-rights-848531.html. This article examines the rise of BTS' popularity.
 13. Jin, Dal Yong. "Hallyu 2.0: The New Korean Wave in the Creative Industry." *International Institute Journal*, MPublishing, University of Michigan Library, 1 Mar. 2013. Used this in the literature section along with Michael Fuhr's work. Both he and Dal Yong Jin share similar philosophies on why K-pop has reached global success.
 14. Jin, Dal Yong. *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media*. University of Illinois Press, 2016. I used this in the literature (section similar to the one above) used to further my point about how Hallyu and the Korean wave are responsible for the global popularity of K-pop.
 15. jypentertainment April 11, 2015 "Who's Your Mama? (Feat. Jessi)" Youtube.com <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUGQ7Tz4os0> JYP's official company channel in which he posts his own solo projects as well as his artists music videos. Since he is the CEO, of the company JYP, does not often have time to focus on his own career but every once in a while, he drops a new song, to the amusement of the artist's in his company. Who's Your Mama was no different, as the live performance and choreography matched what was seen in stage performances. The live performances left out the creepiness of him being at the gym, but it still had the awkwardness of

- him praising women for their derrière. Many idols have done covers of his songs and some of the artists under his label have parodied it. Even these covers and parodies relate to the issue of gender bias in Korea.
16. *Kill Your Darlings*. Eslake, Stephanie. “I Got This: Consumerism and K-Pop.” www.killyourdarlings.com.au/article/i-got-this-consumerism-and-k-pop/. Although I did not end up using this source in my project, it was still beneficial because it helped with understanding the consumer side of K-pop.
17. *Koreaboo*. “The SOPA Scandal: Here's Everything We Know So Far.” 19 Mar. 2019, www.koreaboo.com/news/sopa-scandal-full-story-update/. This provided me with information about the SOPA scandal, in which high school kids publicly announced that they were being exploited and harassed by their elders. This shows the dark side of the Korean Music industry in which many idols are forced into prostitution-like situations. With the revelation of the SOPA scandal, it adds an even more unsettling side to the industry knowing that minors.
18. Kang, Min Sung. “Korean Wave: Korean American Identity.” http://www.etd.ceu.hu/2015/kang_min-sung.pdf. This was an academic work that was very useful in distinguishing and explaining how diaspora affects Korean Americans through the Korean Wave.
19. Lee, W. (2018). *Diversity of K-Pop: A Focus on Race, Language, and Musical Genre*. (Electronic Thesis or Dissertation). <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>. This was very helpful in looking at the issues of race and diversity in K-pop. In one section, Lee talks about Alex Reid, who is considered to be the first non-Asian, African American idol. I cited the information given in this work to add to a section I wrote about her. I

- examined her entrance into the world and the struggles she faced that ultimately led her to leave her group. This included lack of communication, not getting paid, and racism.
20. *MTV News Staff*. 2019. "For Asian-American Artists, K-pop Is A Homecoming." February 7. <http://www.mtv.com/news/3112012/for-asian-american-artists-k-pop-is-a-homecoming/>. MTV's article was helpful as it discusses how Korean Americans, who have moved to Korea to pursue music whether as soloists or as part of an idol group, feel now that K-pop has finally reached the U.S. and the western market. It connects the ideas of the diaspora and how Korean American children grew up and were impacted by it. Many of them discuss how they have reconnected or embraced their Korean culture.
21. *Medium, Noteworthy.com* Watts, Matthew. "Monsta X: Being a K-Pop Idol in the Age of Online Harassment." - The Journal Blog, 10 Nov. 2019. [blog.usejournal.com/https-medium-com-monsta-x-being-a-k-pop-idol-in-the-age-of-online-harassment-ac0e77a16c58](https://medium.com/monsta-x-being-a-k-pop-idol-in-the-age-of-online-harassment-ac0e77a16c58). This source was immensely useful for the dark side of K-pop section. The article specifically focuses on the group Monsta X and the recent online harassment they have faced which caused one of their members, Wonho to withdraw from the group.
22. *NPR* "How the South Korean Government Made K-Pop A Thing." *NPR*, NPR, 16 Apr. 2015, www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/04/13/399414351/how-the-south-korean-government-made-k-pop-a-thing. This resource was very useful in providing me with information on PSY and the earlier (2012) K-pop wave. Specifically, the author Kat Chow cites multiple other people and sources in her arguments about why

- and how K-pop first became exposed to the West in 2012, but also describes how it was not effective until PSY's video went viral.
23. *NPR* "K-Pop, Korean Popular Music, Hits no. 1 in the U.S." Washington, D.C.: NPR, 2018. ProQuest. 7 May 2020. Found this from the ProQuest database. I found this transcript from an episode in which the host talked about the success of K-pop and specifically BTS career. She cites the recent escalation and popularity of their music based on the Billboard Music charts. This also briefly mentions PSY at the end in comparison to BTS and acknowledging his success.
24. *New York Times*, "Can K-Pop Conquer America?" 30 June 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/arts/music/popcast-kpop-kcon.html>. I used this NYT podcast focuses PSY and his career. It was very helpful in learning about how he was one of the first major viral YouTube hits, and how in 2012, PSY really became a well-known K-pop figure. This was used to support the NPR article in the section about PSY.
25. officialpsy July 15, 2012 "GANGNAM STYLE" Youtube.com <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bZkp7q19f0> Page for PSY's official channel in which the official (as there are many parodies) music video for Gangnam Style can be found.
26. Oh, Chuyun. (2015). *Queering spectatorship in K-pop: The androgynous male dancing body and western female fandom*. *The Journal of Fandom Studies*, 3(1), 59–78. This was the source I used in my class discussions as well as in the section and JYP and the idea of gender bias in K-pop. The "female gaze" is a reoccurring theme through my paper and this article has been very useful. For example, Oh explains that

- male idols are ‘fetishized’ by their young female fans in a way that female idols are not. This is not to say that female idols do not have their own issues, but I think this article offer a unique insight into the life of a male idol.
27. PSY Gangnam Style. 2020. In *Wikipedia*. April 29, 2020. This article was used to look up the statistics for the Gangnam Style music video. I was interested in finding out how many views it had gotten, since PSY is one of the first major viral Youtube sensations, as well as being responsible for the new wave of K-pop success in 2012.
28. *SBS PopAsia*. 25 July 2018. “TWICE's Jihyo Talks about Struggling as a Trainee for 10 Years.” www.sbs.com.au/popasia/blog/2018/07/25/twices-jihyo-talks-about-struggling-trainee-10-years. SBS Asia’s article was extremely useful as it went into the section in paper about Jihyo the leader of Twice. This an interview with Jihyo, in which she recounts, what it was like being an idol trainee for over ten years, from the age of 9 until her debut in 2015 (at the age of 18). She gets personal about her fears and her struggles saying she would often get discouraged and wondered if all the hard work was really worth it. This was especially hard for her because, she was forced to be on a reality show program even after having been a trainee for many years before that.
29. *South China Morning Post*. “K-Pop Is an Infectious Disease, Not a Great Cultural Export.” 2 Mar. 2018, www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2126242/k-pop-infectious-disease-not-cultural-export-be-proud. This article is about the dark side of K-pop and the pressures idols face. It was very significant to my project. It referenced the death of Jonghyun who committed suicide. In the aftermath of his death there were calls for better mental health standards in South Korea.

30. "Students in Hallyu Wave Find Common Ground as K-pop Fans." US Fed News Service, Including US State News. March 2015, 2018. ProQuest. 7 May 2020.
<http://ezproxy.purchase.edu:2048/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2017614683?accountid=14171> This article was from the Purchase library source and it was very helpful to read. The piece discusses how students at the University of Texas discovered and gained interest in K-pop and from reading the article I could relate to the same feelings the students had. For instance, the article describes how the students learned about K-pop and intertwining with their personal experiences made it easier to understand K-pop and the Korean wave. One of the students did not know about K-pop until college. He became so infatuated with the culture that he eventually became the president of their school's Hallyu club. "It was a brand-new spectrum for me," Torres said. "It was unique and so different. It's very addicting, definitely an eye opener." This was similar to the experience I had when I first discovered K-pop. I was also in my freshman year of college when I discovered it through YouTube and social media, but once I became more interested, I not only realized I loved the music but I was fascinated by the culture as well. It was good to read for the similarities of my interviews as well as relating to my own experience.
31. Shohat, E., & Stam, R. (2014). *Unthinking Eurocentrism: multiculturalism and the media*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis. This book has been very helpful to me for learning more about the Eurocentric mindset that the west still has especially in regard to the rising popularity of K-pop. This gave helpful information about the term of diaspora in connection to the Jewish people, this was helpful insights for the introduction and merging into how I found K-pop as an Asian American woman.

32. Saeji, T C. (CBSaeji) December 8, 2019. “*K-pop , Tradition, and Koreanifying Tradition.*” Youtube.com
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IFa1MXngnk&t=427s> In Saeji’s video was important in terms explaining the marketing and consumption side of K-pop. Her video lecture connected K-pop with tourism and marketing. I was able to use part of this lecture in the literature section and referenced back to it in the section about BTS, I mention both their video and Topp Dogg’s video. I found both videos to be ‘extremely Korean.’ BTS was praised by fans for their video promoting their culture, but when Topp Dogg did the same thing with their video, they were criticized because people thought it was disingenuous and exploitative.
33. Solomon, Andrew. “Korea's S.M. Entertainment: The Company That Created K-Pop.” *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 31 July 2013.
www.forbes.com/sites/forbesasia/2013/07/31/koreas-s-m-entertainment-the-company-that-created-k-pop/. This article was very useful because it gave clear information on the history of K-pop. Specifically, it gave information about the creation of the idol industry. It said that the idol industry first started in 1995, by Lee Soo Man, CEO, and founder of the largest and most popular entertainment agency in Korea, SM Entertainment.
34. *The Odyssey Online*. Odom, Tatiana. “KPOP and 8 Reasons Why it’s So Popular.” *The Odyssey Online*, 16 Oct. 2019. www.theodysseyonline.com/kpop-and-8-reasons-why-its-popular. This source laid out eight aspects of what makes K-pop successful. Some of these things include performance, lyrics, and choreography. I used this in the section about BTS.

35. Yoon, Tae-Jin, and Dal Yong Jin. *The Korean Wave Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality*. Lexington Books, 2017. I used this in the literature review section and to support Saeji's lecture about how K-pop helps and effects the Korean tourism market.