Breaking Down the Language Barrier: Inside K-pop’s Fan-Driven Phenomenon

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Prologue: Riding the Wave

Sitting on the floor of her bedroom in Arlington, Virginia, Iris Luoma, 15, opens an audio lesson on Korean verb conjugations on her laptop. Her notebook with carefully color-coded notes is propped on her lap, and all her pens lie on the floor. The organization of her notes is reflected in the decor of her room: She has one wall dedicated entirely to her favorite K-pop group, Monsta X, and the pictures are organized so carefully, making it look like a giant puzzle, meticulously solved.

“I started learning Korean in 2017, but I’ve been slacking a bit,” she said with a laugh. “I like how it sounds in songs, and I wanted to know how to speak and understand it.”

Iris has only been actively listening to K-pop since 2017, but she always had an interest in the genre. She recalls finding out about Hyuna, a solo artist, back in 2015, with her song “Roll Deep,” and had casually been listening to a few K-pop songs since then. In 2017 she discovered the boy group Astro, through the Korean TV show “To Be Continued,” which was when her infatuation started.

“I got so attached to the characters after watching the show,” she explained. “I had no idea they were K-pop idols until the last episode, and then I just had to look them up.”

She found the music video for their song “Baby,” thought it was cute, and two days later she knew everything she could about the six-member group. After that, it was like a snowball effect: She began expanding her horizons, finding group after group but also developing an interest in the language. She began finding lessons online and through phone apps, sifting through the countless resources to find the best ones.

Since then, however, her motivation to learn Korean grew.

“I first started learning it because of K-pop, but now I’m learning it because I’m
interested in Korean culture as a whole,” Iris said. “K-pop was definitely the gateway though.”

She expressed a desire not only to visit, but also, hopefully, to study in the country someday. Iris is not unusual: Many K-pop fans have found that the music led them to develop an interest in the language, and subsequently an interest in the country itself.

However, there are also fans on the other end of the spectrum: those who are happy listening to the music without much interest in any other aspect of the Korean language. One of those fans is Francisco Noriega, a 20-year-old global studies major from Oakland, California.

“I’ve never been invested enough in Korean culture outside of K-pop to attempt to learn Korean,” he said, although he does admit to having some knowledge of the language. “I naturally picked up phrases from variety shows on YouTube.”

Noriega, who attends the University of California in Santa Barbara, mentions that the first K-pop group he got into was the girl group Blackpink, which consists of four members – two of whom speak fluent English. That was definitely a perk for him: He found that they were the easiest to follow due to that, especially for a newer K-pop fan. He also sees the ease the members have in English-speaking situations as an asset in the face of globalization.

“My specific interest in techno-globalization initially drew me to K-pop because I had heard of the global influence that took a hand in creating the genre,” he said. “I’m genuinely fascinated by how [K-pop] is slowly becoming a force of globalization.”

Regardless, whether fans are interested in the language, Noriega is right: It’s undeniable that K-pop is boldly asserting itself in the world of international music and culture.

K-pop, the abbreviation of Korean pop, is a genre of music developed in South Korea. Modern K-pop (1990s onward) is characterized by “idol groups”: groups of performers known for their vocal and dance skills above all else. These groups are split up into boy and girl groups,
as they are rarely co-ed. However, there are also solo artists, who are idols who often (but not always) left their group, or whose group disbanded.

Every so often over the past two decades, K-pop found a way to infiltrate media across the world; in the past few years, however, it has been making waves as never before. This trend of Korean pop culture gaining popularity overseas is called “Hallyu” (a term coined by Chinese media in 1998) or simply the “Korean Wave.” There have been four waves of modern K-pop since the first one in the late 1990s, and we have been in the Fourth Wave, the most influential one to date, since the late 2000s.

The Fourth Wave is characterized by a heavy emphasis on social media. It is also referred to as the “Social Media Wave,” as entertainment companies (the Korean equivalent to record labels) began relying on social media platforms as a means of promotion.

However, social media would have not been the asset that it is had it not been for the fans who frequent the platforms. K-pop fans on social media could double as promotion teams with their constant posting and sharing about groups, both well-established ones and newer “rookie groups.”

With this social media boom, the country of origin of this genre no longer seems to matter – and neither does the language. The majority of international K-pop fans does not understand the language and yet are absolutely dedicated to the genre.

Now, the question is why.

Why are these fans attracted to music in a language they don’t understand?

Translations for songs are readily available, but they are not always utilized: Some international fans could not live without them, but most of those interviewed have shown no interest in them. Music is a universal language, but there must be enormous factors
overshadowing the language barrier for fans to dedicate themselves to these artists to such an extent.

Speaking of fans, it is important to put into perspective how many fans of the Korean Wave there are around the world. The Korea Foundation, a nonprofit government organization, was established in 1991 to promote Korean culture and build relationships with international communities. The foundation releases reports every year called “Global Hallyu,” which tracks the spread of Korean pop culture internationally. Between 2016 and 2018, the number of estimated Hallyu fans around the world jumped from 35 million in 86 countries to 89.19 million across 113 countries – all of this excludes Korea. That’s approximately a 155% increase, and the foundation predicts that numbers will hit 100 million by the end of next year.

Many publications have attributed this growth to the boy band BTS, and not without reason. BTS debuted in 2013 under Big Hit Entertainment, but broke into the international scene three years later with the album “Wings.” The music video for the lead single, “Blood Sweat and Tears,” broke 6 million views within 24 hours. Although it still fell behind the music video for "Work" by the American singer Rihanna, which got 11.9 million views in the first 24 hours, it made BTS the first K-pop group to achieve those kinds of numbers. The album itself opened at No. 26 on the U.S. Billboard 200 chart (which ranks the most popular albums of the week in the U.S. based on album sales and streams) and propelled the group to the top of the Billboard Social 50 chart in October 2016, making them the first K-pop group to reach this level of popularity.

These achievements have much to do with the social media wave but, more important, with the fans.

“BTS wasn’t even aiming for America – it was all the fans,” said Monique Melendez, a K-pop journalist who has written for publications such as Billboard and Spin Magazine. “A lot of
that was a fan-driven push, with fans reaching out to TV networks, to radio stations, to everyone
in America that they could reach out to.”

Since “Wings,” BTS’ popularity has only skyrocketed. In 2017, they set off on The
Wings Tour, which spanned the course of 11 months. They performed 40 shows in 12 countries,
totaling an attendance of 550,000 fans. Midway through the tour, the group attended the
Billboard Music Awards and won Top Social Artist – and once again, they were the first Korean
artist to win a Billboard award.

Chapter 1: The First Wave

BTS has obviously gained themselves a lot of attention and admiration, but one of their
most important supporters is Seo Taiji, the leader of the former boy group Seo Taiji & Boys. If
it’s impossible to write about the Fourth Wave without mentioning BTS, it would be absurd to
write about the First Wave – the birth of K-pop – without mentioning Seo Taiji & Boys.

They were formed under Bando Eumban and their first appearance was on one of
Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation’s (MBC) talent shows, where they performed their song
“Nan Arayo” (translating to “I know”). “Nan Arayo” was a stark contrast from the popular music
at the time, as it featured rap superimposed over heavy-metal sounds. This unfamiliar genre
earned them the lowest score from the jury, but also the attention of Korean teenagers. Their
unique sound, sense of fashion and the incorporation of dance into their performances piqued the
interest of the youth, who began to copy them.

It’s crucial to acknowledge just how much Seo Taiji & Boys appealed to a young
audience. After the success of Seo Taiji & Boys’ second album “Hayeoga” in 1993, teenagers
became the focus of the Korean music industry. They were the prime consumers of the genre,
and so the music industry quickly shifted to a more “teen-centric” view, and they did so by
producing more idol groups. This was when K-pop’s boy and girl group craze, otherwise known as “idol culture,” was born.

When idol groups began to fade during the Second Wave of K-pop in the 2000s, idol culture began to be defined by solo idols. BoA, whose birth name is Bo-Ah Kwon, is a solo artist managed by SM Entertainment who debuted in Korea in 2000, and then in Japan in 2002. BoA’s incredible success in the Japanese market played a part in the changing cultural relations between Japan and Korea, two countries with a tumultuous past. Japan is now one of the biggest markets for K-pop internationally.

However, the same cannot be said for her 2008 American debut. Her debut song, “Eat You Up,” flopped, and along with the low sales of her following Japanese album, her career steadily declined.

Many artists at the time faced the same fate when it came to the American market. The United States was not quite ready for it yet. It is argued that race, ethnicity, and the musical sound as a whole were contributing factors to idols’ lackluster attempts at breaking into the American market.

The Third Wave of K-pop saw a reemergence of idol groups, known as second-generation groups, many of which are still active to this day. The production value of K-pop shot through the roof: Performances were more refined and video production increased in quality due to the government’s financial support. TVXQ, a five-member boy group also under SM Entertainment, is said to be at the center of this phenomenon. The group was hugely successful in both Japan and China. Their 2005 Japanese debut, two years after their Korean debut, propelled them to continental fame in Asia.

While TVXQ was never able to achieve fame in the West, their successor, Super Junior,
was. The group debuted in Korea in 2005 and gained popularity four years later with the song “Sorry Sorry,” which led to the Fourth Wave of K-pop. The Third and Fourth Wave do not have a clear beginning and end, with one flowing seamlessly into the other. However, there are some distinct differences that emerged over time to truly distinguish the two. The Fourth saw an increased strictness in training periods for wannabe idols, as well as more ambitious international marketing strategies. With Super Junior slowly gaining European fame, the Fourth Wave saw companies pushing for more groups to gain Western success.

It was not until Psy’s “Gangnam Style” in 2012 that K-pop started making its appearance in the United States. It charted on Billboard’s U.S. Streaming Songs and Rap Streaming Songs charts for three years right after its release, a feat that has yet to be achieved by any other K-pop artist.

**Chapter 2: Washing Over American Shores**

One thing “Gangnam Style” did was open the doors for other K-pop acts, namely the aforementioned BTS. Since their breakout into the American pop mainstream in 2016, BTS has consistently broken their own records, leaving other potential competitors in the dust.

However, competing entertainment companies are seeing this as a challenge they are happy to face. In October 2019, SM Entertainment debuted the K-pop supergroup SuperM, consisting of seven members taken from the most popular boy groups under the company: EXO, SHINee and NCT. SuperM’s self-titled debut EP opened at No. 1 on the Billboard 200 chart, a staggering achievement: No other group so far has debuted at No. 1 on any Billboard chart.

“I’m going to hold out hope for SuperM,” said Melendez, the journalist. “That’s a very concerted effort by a company to appeal to American audiences.”

Some companies are taking it even further. In May 2019, the boy group Monsta X signed
to the American record label Epic Records and the American management company Maverick Management. This is not the first time a K-pop group has teamed up with an American label, but they are determined to break away from the mold. On Feb. 14, 2020, they released their first English-language album, “All About Luv.”

This album can potentially be a game-changer for K-pop in the U.S. While “All About Luv” is not the first English-language album by a K-pop artist, it is the first time a group released one with an international record label and actively promoted it in the U.S. with events such as pop-up stores, album release parties and fan meet-and-greets.

Potentially, this album could both draw in new fans and appeal to old fans as there is no longer a language barrier. However, the reality is that fans are a lot more conflicted.

Iris, the 15-year-old from Virginia whose favorite group is Monsta X, found herself disappointed after listening to the album.

“Some songs are fine, but it’s kind of boring,” she said. “It’s just not them, you know?”

Monsta X is known for its high-energy songs, complete with fast tempos and almost aggressive rap style. However, “All About Luv” saw an influx of ballads, with only one song featuring a rap part by one of their rappers – which is ironic, since they consistently feature English raps in their Korean songs.

“My friends who don’t listen to K-pop don’t know about Monsta X,” she said. “Most people aren’t going to listen to it just because it’s in English. I think they would rather listen to their Korean music.”

Iris even points out that, if non-fans do like the songs on “All About Luv,” they may not like Monsta X’s Korean music because of how different it is.

Jeff Benjamin, Billboard’s K-pop columnist, points out that drastically changing a
group’s style in order to cater to a specific market is never a good idea. He brings up how BoA and other earlier K-pop artists who tried to break into the industry made music to cater to the American audience – and how that did not work.

“The K [in K-pop] was de-emphasized,” he said. “It was about trying to blend in with the pop landscape, but personally I think that was a disservice to the actual artist and the actual art. I think only, as time showed, emphasizing the K was probably for the best.”

Benjamin applies this to Monsta X’s new English music. “It’s not the Monsta X I know and love,” he said. “To me, I felt like the identity they created as a K-pop artist and why they became so beloved in the K-pop world was no longer there in their English music.”

Some fans agree with this sentiment, and see their English music as something unnatural for the group.

“Monsta X always have been, and always will be, a Korean pop group,” said Kiersten Bergman, a 15-year old fan from Arlington, Virginia. “To ask them to record an entire album in English is asking them to pretend to be from another culture, at least from my perspective. I’d much rather hear them be comfortable in whatever language than hear them forced to sing and rap in a language most of them don’t speak.”

On the other hand, some fans see this album as the perfect opportunity for the group to really secure K-pop’s place in the mainstream.

“I really love it,” said Jordan Lehman, a 25-year old fan from Windsor Heights, Iowa. “I understand it doesn’t sound like their other music but I expected that when they were trying to break into the American market.”

Lehman argues that the change in their sound is a good way to introduce them to a new fan base, saying that it’s reminiscent of the English boy band One Direction. “I think that’s good
for them,” she said.

There’s a lot to be said about Monsta X’s attempt to gain success in the English-speaking world. On top of releasing an English-language album, from Feb. 14-20, the band went on a promotional tour of the U.S, with half the week being spent in Los Angeles and the other in New York. Their week was packed with promotional events such as album signings, Q&A sessions and hi-touches (an event unique to K-pop where fans line up to hi-five the band members).

However, the events were met with a lot of criticism.

“These [events] were geared solely towards [Monsta X fans] who were already going to buy the album,” said Caitlin Creech, a 29-year-old fan from Washington. “We need the general public to get behind Monsta X so while this was a great experience as a [fan], I do not think their management did enough to promote it nationally.”

This is a recurring complaint from Monsta X fans who attended the events. Releasing an album in English is one thing, but promoting it well is another. Creech attended nearly every promotional event held in Manhattan, and while she is incredibly proud of their accomplishments, she thinks they are being poorly managed in the United States – a disappointing obstacle in their road to worldwide recognition.

“They also needed to promote Monsta X on major radio and TV shows,” she pointed out. “Maverick Management and Epic Records are huge companies, so I expected better national promo.”

After looking at the album’s chart results, it is hard to argue with her point. “All About Luv” did well on American charts during the week of Feb. 29, the first qualifying week following its release. It debuted Monsta X on the Billboard 200 chart, earning them fifth place, but sadly it did not last. The following week saw the album drop a whopping 155 spots, leaving
them at 160 for a week before dropping off the chart completely. It is a drastic fall compared to the albums surrounding it: Justin Bieber’s “Changes,” which was at first place during the week of Feb. 29, was still doing well at ninth place three weeks later (week of Mar. 21).

It is hard to say why exactly “All About Luv” was not able to last in the charts, but there is a plethora of contributing factors: the lack of promotion geared towards the general public (as opposed to just fans), the drastic change in their musical style, and perhaps also the general public’s lack of interest in K-pop.

“I think that people project outdated oriental views on K-pop groups,” said Noriega. “Now that they’re solidifying themselves as artists [in the American mainstream], I think any negative reactions to them making music in English is just pushing that narrative.”

He compares it to how American pop artists often incorporate Spanish cultural elements and aesthetics to their music, regardless of whether or not they are of that culture.

“When non-Western folks do it,” he said, “there’s so much negative attention drawn to it.”

However, there is still a lot to be figured out when it comes to K-pop in the U.S., or K-pop in English. “All About Luv” has been a valiant first try, and other entertainment companies can learn from their successes but also their mistakes. The language barrier may actually be the least of their concerns, seeing as how this English-language album has yet to reach the accomplishments other Korean-language albums have had in the U.S.

Chapter 3: Merging of Cultures: A Benefit or a Drawback?

While other K-pop artists who are seeing a lot of fame and recognition in the U.S. have not released English-language albums, they have done many collaborations with American artists. For instance, BTS have collaborated with multiple American artists such as DJ Steve
Aoki and the singer Lauv. The music video for their track “Boy With Luv,” featuring the singer Halsey, holds the YouTube record for the most views within the 24-hour period following its release.

“When it comes to collaborations, I think that could actually be a really strong and exciting point with K-pop artists,” said Benjamin, “as long as they keep their identity intact.”

Other music journalists agree.

“I think it can be good, but I don't like when artists rid themselves of their own style to do this,” said Tamar Herman, a K-pop correspondent for Billboard. “For instance, NCT Dream has had very successful collaborations with HRVY and Prettymuch, which felt like an extension of their brand.”

NCT Dream, a group under SM Entertainment, released a collaboration with the English singer HRVY (whose real name is Harvey Cantwell) on June 6, 2019. The song, titled “Don’t Need Your Love,” features vocals in both Korean and English, seamlessly flowing into one another. More important, however, fans were thrilled to hear that NCT Dream’s signature upbeat pop sound was preserved.

“The song made it seem as if HRVY was actually a member of NCT Dream,” said Iris, the fan from Virginia. “SM Entertainment found a way to make it sound like their own style while still keeping a hint of the person they’re collaborating with.”

The music video illustrates this effort as well. HRVY flew out to South Korea to shoot the video with the band, which is rare for these kinds of collaborations. In the video, he is dressed similarly to the band, in shades of pink and white, and dances with them as an integral part of the formation.

There are a few other collaborations that still retain the K-pop artist’s original sound but
alienate the collaborating artist. For instance, BTS’ collaboration with Halsey sounds in line with their other music, but does little to highlight her parts.

However, since Halsey was simply featured on the song, which is, at its root, a BTS song, this tactic makes a lot of sense. It’s when the reverse happens that it begins to cause a few problems.

“If there’s a way to bring both worlds together, it makes for better synergy and something that could be amazing,” said Benjamin. “When we see those identities washed away, you can say that’s a larger conversation to be had about Asian representation or Asian identities being de-emphasized in order to be more palatable to a larger, mainstream audience.”

Once again, we can look to Monsta X. Their first-ever English-language single, “Who Do U Love?” featured the rapper French Montana. This song was the first taste of what was to come from them in terms of English music, and as one can probably guess, it saw a complete erasure of Monsta X’s original sound.

“Our sound is what makes them, them,” said Suha Ansari, a 15-year-old fan from Toronto. “That’s what makes them special and that’s why they’re appealing.”

“Who Do U Love?” effectively washed away Monsta X’s original identity and tried to mold them to American standards, sounding more in line with something French Montana might have released.

It’s important to note, however, that these arguments only apply to Western artists being featured on K-pop songs. There have also been many K-pop artists who have been the ones being featured on Western songs, in which case the Western artist’s identity would be stronger than the K-pop group. Some examples of this include “Kiss And Make Up,” by the English singer Dua Lipa featuring the girl group Blackpink.
Shevaun Mosley, a 22-year old fan from New York, sees these collaborations as a mutually beneficial relationship.

“Since entertainment companies follow the current trends in music, I feel like most K-pop fans have a very narrow view of music,” she said. “Doing collaborations introduce K-pop fans to new music as well.”

However, since those kinds of collaborations do not really emphasize the K-pop artists’ identities, some fans find it harder to argue that they are an effective way to introduce K-pop into the mainstream.

“I hate it,” said Noriega bluntly, regarding Dua Lipa’s collaboration with Blackpink. “In my opinion, it does a disservice to Blackpink and their production team. It’s kind of like watered-down K-pop.”

As attempts to cater to an international audience with English-language music and collaborations are not proving to be as successful as companies may have wished, one thing is glaringly obvious: The language has nothing to do with fans’ dedication to the genre.

Epilogue: Where Do We Go From Here?

Regardless of efforts put in by entertainment companies, fans from around the world flock to this genre with little-to-no knowledge of the Korean language. Perhaps it’s undeniable that it has something to do with the authenticity of the genre in its native language.

“The fact that Psy broke out with a Korean song and BTS has never strayed from their idea of wanting to sing in Korean for the most part… I think people hear it and they see it in a more natural way,” said Benjamin. “It feels like a more natural expression, a more genuine expression of themselves when it is in their native language.”

Ever since its foundation, the K-pop industry has heavily relied on fans, and now is no
exception. Fans can distinguish between genuine efforts and those that just aim for American popularity – which means the future of the genre in the international music scene rests on the fans’ shoulders.

“I don’t know if deliberate pushes into the American market and English-language music will appeal in the way that BTS’ organic blowup appealed,” said Melendez. “I think if anything is going to happen with another group rising to the top, it’s going to be the fans doing it, not the labels, not the PR, not any of that.”

Despite fans showing no sign of letting up, it is uncertain where K-pop going from here in terms of Western success.

“I don’t know if it’s going to just keep coming in waves as it has been, or if it’s going to become more and more popular from now on,” said Iris. “Will another group take over after BTS? I really don’t know. I can see it going both ways.”

“I think people are still reluctant to have Asian pop stars,” said Melendez, the journalist for Billboard and Spin. “I think if BTS loses momentum, I don’t think groups like Monsta X or NCT will be able to pick it up. I think K-pop, for the most part, will stay as it is right now, where there might be one group in the mainstream but for the most part, it’s still a bit of a niche thing.”

Noriega, as always, is more critical and skeptical.

“I think that, after the few that make it now, it’ll honestly die down in the West,” he said. “I really don’t see it having any longevity. Plus, there’s obviously a specific kind of K-pop group [the general public] likes and I doubt groups outside of those genres will make it.”

He points out that there are already token groups, such as BTS and Blackpink, and that the American mainstream may still be unwilling to accept K-pop as a serious music genre – partially due to a superiority complex.
“It’ll be more of a spectacle,” he said.

However, long-term fans of the genre know that this Fourth Wave has had more of a global impact than ever before. Mosley, a fan from New York, who has been interested in K-pop since 2012, notes just how things have changed since then for American fans of the genre.

“When I first became a K-pop fan, international fans were at a huge disadvantage,” she said. “Concerts in the U.S. were very rare and when idols were brought here, it was more for cultural events in California and nowhere else. Now we get a group coming almost every month.”

Melendez believes K-pop artists have been making and breaking records since the start of the Fourth Wave and are constantly outdoing themselves, and there is still so much for them to accomplish. Benjamin is of the opinion that it’ll soon be time for a girl group to take the spotlight.

“I think we’re going to see a lot more female representation coming through,” he said. “In America, every five years or so, trends come back. It’s been about five years since Fifth Harmony first broke out, who were our last big girl group. We’re going to see girl groups have a moment really soon.”

It is an indisputable theory: The most viewed K-pop music video, after Psy’s “Gangnam Style,” is not by BTS, but by Blackpink for their song “Ddu-Du Ddu-Du,” amassing 1.1 billion views.

Above all, he excitedly points out that album sales and tours have only been growing since 2012 – the signs of a healthy industry and not just an overnight fad that will peter out quickly.

“It’s gotten to a place where the K is here. The K is not being washed away, it’s not being
hidden,” he said. “Regardless of whatever K-pop looks like in the future, I do think there’s a place for it at the table, and there will be a place for it, just because the fans, the work that’s been done… It all speaks for itself.”
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