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## THE PENINSULA

### 2021 in Review: K-pop Surviving Through the Pandemic

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*This is the seventh in a 10 part series looking at how the issues identified in KEI's annual "10 Issues to Watch for on the Korean Peninsula" series developed in 2021. The original "10 Issues" piece can be [found here](#).*

In many ways, K-pop in 2021 was not terribly different from K-pop in 2020: a large chunk of the year was spent focusing on online content, with in-person shows now just starting to creep back onto the schedule. The thing to watch will be how much the COVID era has

The K-pop industry shifted to online-only concerts with remarkable speed. The first fully remote, live shows launched within just a few months of the initial lockdowns. This trend continued through 2021, with more and more groups launching their own online shows,

often evolving and finding new ways to keep the content fun and fresh for those stuck at home.

Now the industry is branching out even further, testing more opportunities for fan engagement in digital spaces. From fully digital fan meetups that allow fans to meet and get signatures from groups' digital avatars, to augmented reality (AR) virtual experiences, to new forays into the controversial world of NFTs, the K-pop industry is showing once again that they are in the lead on testing out the new frontiers of digital fan engagement.

Not everyone was able to capitalize on this trend, however, and in many ways COVID highlighted many of the existing gaps between the haves and have nots in the industry. While many acts are able to attract huge audiences whether in person or online, and have the funds and technology to run online shows, new and smaller groups do not have that luxury. Now, the government has stepped in to help slightly, pledging to build an online concert hall that will allow new and indie artists to stream their shows.

Meanwhile, fans and artists alike appear more than ready to head back to the stands and see their favorite artists live and in person. At the end of November and early December, BTS held four sold-out shows in Los Angeles, with fans flocking to the city from both the United States and around the world to see the band in person for the first time in nearly two years. In fact, it appears that the group broke records for LA's SoFi stadium, with a representative announcing that BTS was the first concert to sell out four shows there and also recorded the venue's highest ticket sales.

But while these shows make it clear that fans are more than ready to get back into the stands, that doesn't mean online content is disappearing. For BTS, for example, fans who are unable to make it to the LA shows could still watch a live stream of the last show. Other acts are continuing with similar hybrid models. This is actually not a COVID-era trend – major groups started simultaneous streaming of their shows long before the pandemic.

But now that online content has become much more common and with COVID variants  
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prompting concerning headlines, the trend to watch in the coming year will be how these  
acts find a balance between in person and digital content.

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alone.*

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## **Return to the Peninsula**