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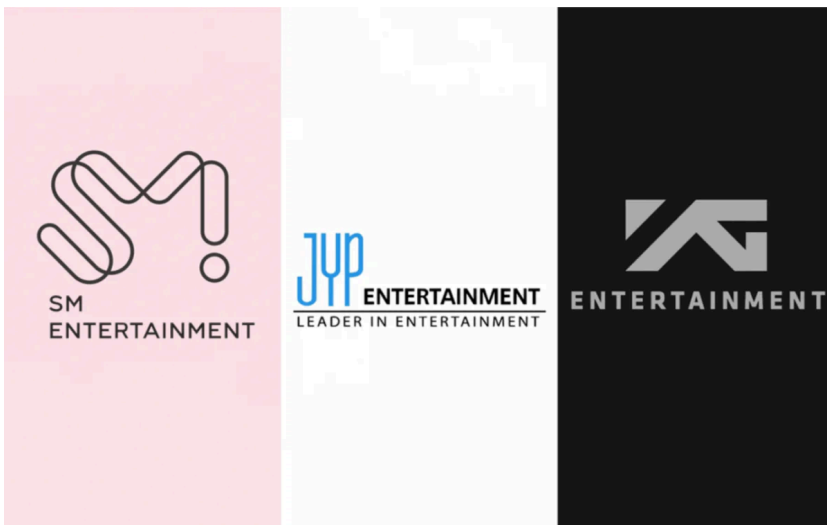
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The Global Rise of K-pop: Cultural Power, Fandom Influence, and the Price of Success

In 2023, South Korea's K-pop industry generated over \$10 billion worldwide, transforming a once-local music scene into one of the most influential cultural forces on the planet. K-pop, abbreviated from Korean Pop, originated in South Korea and is run by entertainment companies to produce music, including upbeat pop, dance music, and ballads. The broader global spread of South Korean culture is known as the Korean Wave, or Hallyu. It has grown since the late 1990s and is still growing now, leading to Korean culture becoming globally known throughout the world. Thanks to strategic media use, passionate fan engagement, and national support, K-pop has transformed from a niche South Korean genre into a worldwide cultural and economic force, exposing the world to South Korea's modern music.



The history of K-pop traces back to April 11, 1992, when a group called Seo Taiji and Boys performed the song “Nan Arayo (I Know)” on South Korea’s Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation. Their synchronized dance, mix of American dance music, hip-hop, rap, and rock, and challenging lyrics led to censorship reform and the formal birth of the K-pop industry. Following this, companies started emerging to train new K-pop artists, such as SM Entertainment in 1995, JYP Entertainment in 1997, and YG Entertainment in 1998, with their trainees quickly going viral across Korea. These entertainment companies established rigorous



idol training systems where trainees went through many auditions and extensive practices in singing, dancing, and physical training for long hours, six days a week, to achieve their debut. It’s crazy because some of these trainees would start as young as 10-12 years old. They may go through these training sessions but there’d never be

a guarantee that they’d end up debuting. This would even include the contracts that they’d sign into. Some people would call it “slave contracts”. These contracts would last for 7-13 years traditionally and the companies would take a huge portion of these idols' earnings. Not only that but idols have to follow such strict rules about dating, weight, image, social media use, etc. The Korean government has even intervened in the past because some contracts were abusive to these idols. Though that was the reality, the success of these companies marked early K-pop, and in 2003, when SM released the duo group TVXQ, which became a foundational part of the second generation K-pop. This industry structure stayed central in South Korea until 2012, when the

famous “Gangnam Style” by PSY went viral, exposing the world to South Korea’s modern music.

The global expansion of K-pop, driven by groups like BTS, Blackpink, Stray Kids, and Twice, is inseparable from the power of its vast, highly organized global fan bases. These fandoms, which include groups such as BTS's "ARMY", Blackpink's "BLINKs" and Twice’s “ONCE”, maintain a constant connection with their idols across all corners of the world. Social media is the primary engine of this engagement, with platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and

Instagram serving as global distribution channels for promotion videos, vlogs, and official music videos. Idols often weren’t allowed to have social media so they’d be someone working on their social media page instead of the idols themselves. They’d pick when their pictures should be posted, when



they’d do certain promotion videos and overall just have complete control on what they’re able to put on the platform. Beyond passive viewing, these fans are active agents in the genre's success, engaging in coordinated digital efforts. They often translate content (lyrics, interviews, and social media posts) to bridge language barriers, create dance and music trends on platforms like TikTok, and organize large-scale streaming and voting events to boost their idols' chart performance and visibility. This passionate, collective effort on social media has transformed

K-pop's following into a global, interactive community that not only consumes content but actively participates in its worldwide promotion.

Kpop growing nationally had a large economic impact for all these companies. The more popular these groups got, the more inclined the fans got to see them in person. This would lead to fans buying tickets to their concerts, buying albums that they release when a new album comes out or even merchandise like lightsticks or shirts that would correspond with the group. Not only this but, thanks to kpop, people around the world wanted to learn more about Korea which would



lead to a lot of tourism in South Korea, specifically Seoul. This would be good for Korea as a whole because when tourists come, that's how they could make even more money for themselves as well as share their culture with tourists who are interested in learning about it. It boosted the economy and international friendliness. Not only this

but Kpop was used as a diplomatic tool known as “soft power”. Soft power is a concept developed by political scientist Joseph Nye. It refers to a country’s ability to influence others not through force or money, but through attraction, persuasion, and cultural appeal. South Korea uses kpop as a soft power because the government intentionally supports kpop, kdramas, beauty products, films and food to build international cultural influence which goes back to The Korean Wave, Hallyu. Fans seeing their favorite groups succeed makes them want to learn the Korean

language so they know what they're saying in their songs or even about the history of Korea. Also seeing how surreal they look, they get into the Korean skincare or beauty standards to try to look similar or someone like them, like glass skin or workouts to slim down. These Kpop idols could be real inspirations for some of these people and could help people really become better for not just their idols but most importantly for themselves. Kpop isn't just music, it's a strategic tool used to boost Korea's global image and influence.

More on beauty standards, there'd be many idols and Korean actors who have very nice skin and they would promote certain beauty products which would of course, be Korean. This would promote people from around the world to also buy these products and try it out for their skin, which also proved to be very helpful for many people. The idea of Korean skincare



promoted the idea of “glass skin” which many Koreans had as well as lighter more natural makeup or even the “no makeup” look, which would be makeup but it wouldn't look like you

had any on. The rise of Kbeauty even promoted new products like cushion foundations and lip tints. Koreans have also influenced the idea of thinness which would influence many fans to go through extreme diets to imitate these idols because many aspire to have thin bodies like they do. Although kpop promotes certain features, American beauty standards have become more diverse, which leads to Americans embracing curvy body types, different skin colors and greater racial diversity compared to the more uniform kpop ideal. Fashion is also a big factor in kpop. Kpop artists are major brand ambassadors for luxury labels, and their distinctive looks, which blend streetwear with high fashion, are increasingly seen in American street style. Kpop has influenced US fashion through high fashion endorsements, the mainstream adoption of Korean street style aesthetics and a promotion of gender fluid styling and bold experimentation. Kpop groups use fashion to create a visual identity and express themselves, encouraging a more fearless approach to personal style among fans. The genre is bold and innovative, which would include creative makeup and striking hairstyles, which serves as a source of inspiration for designers and stylists.

Going back to the conditions that these idols have to go through in paragraph 2, idols could also go through mental health strain because they have all this pressure to maintain perfection in their looks and behavior. Everything they do in front of others is being closely watched. When fans see anything wrong with an idol, they'd criticize harshly. The idol could've gained a little weight and yet, fans are bashing the idol for it, making them feel like they're not taking care of themselves or they're doing a bad job at keeping an eye on what they're eating or their weight. The criticism from their own fans could be so harsh that it could mentally harm an idol who could be really trying their best. Also the difficult schedules that they have to go through could lead to burnout, exhaustion and depression. This connects back to the idol, Lia

from Itzy. In September 2023, Lia had gone on hiatus due to symptoms of extreme tension and anxiety. She received treatment and focused on her health which got her back on her feet in July of 2024. It was issued that it was because of her general health but there's a possibility that fans



on social media contributed to the overall pressure. They'd complain about her weak dancing and how her vocals would sometimes be lacking in some songs or during performances. Another problem is that idols are marketed as products rather than artists considering all they do is make music and make the money for the company they're under. Companies would often push constant content such as albums, merch, livestreams, brand deals, variety shows, ads, tours, and photo cards. All of this so they could make some extra money for the company to take from them. This turns idols into profit generating machines rather than creative individuals. There's also a situation about virtual idols, who worsen the concerns because they're worried they'll replace human artists just for a profit. Another crazy fact is companies wouldn't exactly care for these idols to a great extent. They'd pressure these idols to keep a good image of themselves or undergo plastic surgery. Idols often face scrutiny over appearance from both fans and agencies,

presenting more pressure on the idol to really watch what they eat or what they put on their face so they could maintain a healthy look. Lastly, a major issue that also shows that companies don't care about their idols is toxic fan culture. Extreme stalkers would often be called sasaeng fans and they invade the privacy of these idols, leak personal details and follow idols around. Fanwars lead to cyberbullying harassment and online toxicity. But the thing is, these companies would rely on these parasocial relationships which can be emotionally unhealthy for both the idols and the fans. This could make the idol feel uncomfortable but they rely on this to help them make more money. There are overall more issues but these I would say are the main ones that need to be addressed or more widely known about.

K-pop's global rise is far more than the story of a music genre becoming popular. It's the story of a nation reshaping its identity on the world stage. From its origins with Seo Taiji and Boys to the international success of groups like BTS and Blackpink, K-pop has evolved into a cultural, social, economic, and diplomatic powerhouse. Its influence extends far beyond catchy songs and polished choreography; it fuels worldwide fandoms, boosts South Korea's economy, expands tourism, drives beauty and fashion trends, and strengthens the country's global reputation through soft power. Yet behind the glamour lie important issues that complicate this success, including demanding training systems, harsh beauty standards, mental health challenges, and exploitative industry practices. These realities remind us that K-pop's global shine is built on both cultural innovation and intense pressure placed on the artists who represent it. Ultimately, K-pop stands as a transformative force that connects millions of people across borders, shaping how South Korea is seen by the world, while also challenging audiences to recognize the human cost behind its perfection.

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