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## How Gender Shapes Music: A Comparison Within K-Pop

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## **How Gender Shapes Music: A Comparison within K-Pop**

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**Abstract**

In this paper, I will discuss how Korean Pop (K-Pop) music gained such extensive popularity and prevalence in society in the past 5-10 years. Investigating the audiences in South Korea and the United States, I will examine what caused the rise in popularity and the steady increase in the audience of K-Pop music. Additionally, I will be looking into the demographics of these audiences. In looking at the target audience in both countries, I will be able to answer who the primary audience of K-Pop listeners is.

Korean pop culture and music are still relatively new to the Western world. As such, it becomes challenging to define why the average American has not heard about Korean pop culture before now. As K-Pop has been an established genre since at least the 1990s, this could be explained because of the lack of social media and technology. While Korean Americans might have been exposed to Korean culture and Korean Pop music earlier than a non-Korean American, I aim to question what changed in the past few decades that allowed Korean culture to soar to new heights and popularity, opening a new age for both Koreans and Americans to enjoy Korean culture and music.

Additionally, this thesis aims to define the differences between genders in K-Pop. In using BTS and BLACKPINK, prolific and famous boy groups and girl groups in K-Pop, as case studies, I questioned why gender has an effect on the levels of success and popularity of K-Pop idols. I argue that gender roles depend on where you're at, with the United States and South Korea having very different ideals for what constitutes success in the music industry. While Western ideals and standards place more emphasis on traditional gender roles, Asian

communities place far more emphasis on traditional Asian beauty standards. This is further seen in the way Korean audiences support K-Pop idols versus American audiences. When idols go through rough times and receive a lot of hatred, the support they do receive greatly differs based on the K-Pop idols gender. I argue that male K-Pop idols tend to receive more support than women K-Pop idols. This, in my opinion, creates an industry that is primarily more male friendly and encourages the success of men over women.

## **Introduction**

How does K-Pop music transcend the realm of understanding and still have so much relevance in the world today?

This topic has only just started to be investigated. Beyond South Korea, K-Pop has only recently become a popular form of media consumption. While K-Pop began in South Korea during the 1950s (Arnaud), it was the “idol culture” and new media technology that allowed a “sudden surge of Korean... pop music in Taiwan and China in the late 1990s” (Eun-Young Jung, 75). This started the transnational success of Korean culture and forged the beginning of what we now know as K-Pop groups. The rise of Korean culture and, subsequently, Korean pop music can be largely attributed to the increase in social media usage. To go further into how social media affected the rise in Korean culture, an understood definition of social media must be assumed. Any reference to social media will be using the adopted definition by Kaplan and Heinlein,

*“a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations... and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 61).*

Social media has brought about distinct changes to society as we know it and the patterns of society's consumption (Kaplan & Haenlein, 61). Xingnuo Li, A scholar in the field from China, argues that the cultural exports of South Korea are no longer limited to the Asian region alone (Xingnuo Li, 2617). Social media users, such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc., have allowed a virtual space where there are no boundaries between K-Pop culture and the fanbase. The K-Pop fanbase has such extreme access to the lives of the "idols" that the K-Pop fanbase make up the K-Pop culture and yet, the physical K-Pop culture does not singularly impact the fanbase, but rather both impact the other equally. The popularity of K-Pop music and its culture would not have been possible with the removal from "the network sharing function of social networking sites" (Xingnuo Li, 2619). Social media and the internet enabled and continues to enable K-Pop artists to share their platform. Cracking the American mainstream industry is in large part due to social media and has enabled Korean artists to launch into stardom internationally.

Korean Pop music has become popular for the past decade in Western society because of its ability to connect people. Previous scholars have studied how the strategy of Korean cultural exports (Xingnuo Li); the remaking of the Korean Wave (Eun-Young Jung); forms of media oppression in Asian Americans (Linda Kuo); and Asian and Asian American identities (Mikoyo Conley) played a role in the development and popularity rise of Korean Pop music. In looking at each of the above scholars, they all worked to define how Korean Pop music and culture has had an effect/impact on society. While each author/text highlighted a different region, group, or identity, they all argued that K-Pop music had affected the audience and people who consume it. I agree that Korean pop culture and music affect those who listen and consume it. That said, I would argue that most art has the ability and purpose of creating some



sort of feeling and more profound connection between people. What makes Korean pop music so different from other forms of art? I question why Korean Pop music has so many barriers and yet continues to transcend these boundaries, gaining growth and popularity. As defined by Dictionary.com, K-Pop is a

“genre of pop music originating from South Korea. The genre combines such Western pop music elements as hip-hop and rock with Korean traditions, and frequently involves dance routines and singing in Korean lyrics intermixed with some English”  
(Dictionary.com).

Typically performed by boy bands and girl groups, these K-Pop *idols* or “artists in Korean pop music or the K-Pop industry” (Lois), are insanely popular singers and dancers who have undergone intense training. This training takes place underneath the tutelage of entertainment companies. These companies have a boot camp system where trainees learn to sing, dance, and act in public and the limelight. Only after years of training can K-Pop trainees finally debut as a K-Pop idol. As famous musicians and performers, K-Pop idols are intensely watched and scrutinized. From recording music, promoting albums, meeting with fans, conducting interviews, and touring, K-Pop idols don’t have much time beyond K-Pop. The K-Pop fanbase has a prominent role in the success and fame of a K-Pop star (Lois). No matter how talented one group or band might be, it is the strong and supportive fanbase that will allow them to succeed (Lois).

In discussing the fanbase, it is easy to note that some K-Pop groups rise to fame faster than others. This paper aims to delve deeper into the difference in popularities between K-Pop girl groups and K-Pop boy bands. Throughout society, there has always been a disadvantage to being a woman artist, at least in the American/Western market (Aichele). Women seeking to become musicians faced “similar barriers to the women workers who went on strike in New York in 1908 and 1909 that sparked the first Women’s Day celebrations” (Aichele). Being a woman, let alone being a woman who wanted to become a successful professional musician, meant being educated, receiving encouragement, having time, the funds, and means to perform and record their performances (Aichele). In contrast to male musicians, women musicians always had to work against the model of femininity and what being a “true” woman meant (Aichele). For this paper, gender refers to

*“the characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys that are socially constructed. This includes the norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time”* (World Health Organization).

Gender has such an enormous impact on the roles of our world. The gender of K-Pop idols has dramatically impacted the popularity of different K-Pop groups. The K-Pop fanbase, as a whole, is a large foundation for which the success of K-Pop groups stems. In looking at success

rates and popularities of different K-Pop boy bands and girl groups, I aim to answer if this is this due to any particular reason, whether on the production or consumption side of the market. Additionally, is there a way the rise to fame and “idol” differ between male and women K-Pop groups? Can we attribute this to a societal difference in Asian acceptance for men and women and the unspoken knowledge that males have a greater responsibility and worth in Asian culture? Does this hierarchy extend to K-Pop groups based on gender acceptance and worth? Or is it just a coincidence that bears no further exploration?

## **Literature Review**

### *Global Popularity of Music Genres/Globalization*

Within recent years, the traditional understandings and forms of music have drastically changed. Amongst different music genres, artists worldwide have found ways to collaborate and blend together to create new music (Hilton). These cross-cultural songs and artist features have delivered new understandings of music to audiences everywhere. As such, it becomes almost impossible to define popular music as one entity or thing. In the past decade alone, the rise of different international artists and genres have dominated the United States Pop music charts (Hilton). Latinx singer Bad Bunny, UK artist Harry Styles, and K-Pop band's BTS and BLACKPINK are arguably at the forefront of new music, paving the continuation for globalization in music.

In looking at the past few decades in music, we can define certain trends and memorable moments within the global popularity of music. Using the following definition of globalization, a process of "growing interdependence of the world's economies, cultures, and populations" (Peterson Institute for International Economics), this paper uses the term more narrowly to refer to international music popularity in the United States and the incorporation of different world sounds within music itself. One of the biggest things in common with music today is the mash-up of multiple different styles and languages of music. As such, there has been the complete removal of genre from popular music (Hilton). This bleeds into the audience and what people are focused on listening to. As opposed to prior generations, the young audiences of today's music are not hyper-focused on genre. They do not go to record stores searching for one specific style of music, nor do they go to local supermarkets, picking up one

album on a compact disc (CD). The young audiences of today's music have everything available to them at all times, so their playlist and musical repertoire includes everything mashed together (Hilton).

In prior decades, artists were subjected to being placed in a box. They had their niche and/or a specific thing that worked for them. For example, Johnny Hallyday (Jean-Philippe Léo Smet) was known in France. He is credited to having brought rock and roll to France and was a French rock and roll and pop singer and actor. If Johnny Hallyday was coming onto the scene now, decades later, his influence and music would be in an entirely different place. Due to globalization, the borders of his music would be unconstrained and his music would bleed into other avenues and cultures. The same can be said about other notable artists known for a specific genre of music. Slim Whitman (Ottis Dewey Whitman Jr.) for example, an American country music singer-songwriter might not have only been extremely popular in the United States, but rather internationally. It is possible that in today's time, his yodeling and falsetto could've been featured and put on different tracks with multiple artists. In music today, there is way less constraint. And not every artist has to choose to stay in one lane to guarantee success.

### *Gender within Music*

In all areas of society, there are specific gender roles. Gender roles as defined by Planned Parenthood, are the roles in society that define "how we are expected to act, speak, dress, groom, and conduct ourselves based upon our assigned sex." Every community in the world has sets of gender roles regarding what is socially acceptable. For example, in many

societies women are typically expected to be nurturing and feminine, while men are generally expected to be masculine and strong. While women are allowed to wear skirts and dresses, for the most part, stereotypical society deems men unable to wear skirts and dresses (EduBirdie). These roles translate to all parts of society and are ever-present in the music industry. In the music industry, male and women performers have specific conventions that they are expected to adhere to. Gender roles can be seen in the clothing artists wear, to how they are viewed by audiences, to what lyrics they are expected and/or allowed to sing (EduBirdie).

The American entertainment industry is currently in the middle of an ongoing investigation of the pay gap and lack of representation for artists (Kelly). A 2019 investigation, "Inclusion in the Recording Studio," led by Dr. Stacy L. Smith, marks the University of Southern California's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative's second annual investigation into the music industry. Across the study, it shows depressing numbers as far as gender equality in the American music industry (Kelly). In researching 700 songs, between 2012 and 2018, on the Billboard's year-end Hot 100 chart, researchers were able to study the gender and race of the industry's top performers. Within the three roles in music, women made up 21.7% of artists, 12.3% of songwriters, and only 2.1% of producers (Kelly). These statistics reflect a large gender disparity and gap on the charts. Among 1,455 artists studied, there is only one woman artist for every 4.8 male artists in the industry (Kelly). For producers, this percentage is even less. Within 400 songs, and 871 producers, only 2% were women. That means the gender ratio for music producers is 1 woman for every 47 men (Kelly). This lack of women voices in popular music is stark and points to an exclusivity in the music industry. The underrepresentation on both the stage and behind the scenes is not entirely unshocking. Women have been underpaid and

underrepresented across many industries and job fields for years. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, women are paid 22.6% less than men who have similar-to-equal education and experience (Wilson).

## Lived Experiences of Women in Music

Cataloging data found from interviewing 75 female Songwriters and Producers

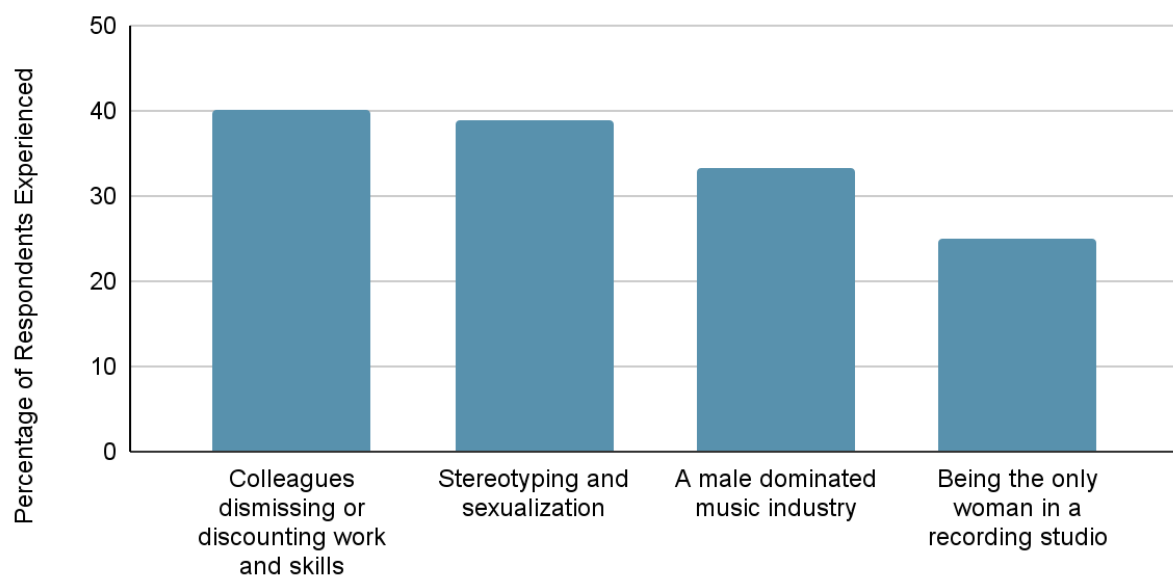


Figure 1: Data from Caitlin Kelly’s “The Music Industry still has a long way to go for Gender Equality” (Forbes, 2019).

In the above graph, 75 women songwriters and producers were interviewed about their experiences within the music industry. Of the interviewed respondents, 40 percent admitted their colleagues have dismissed or discounted their work and/or skills. 39 percent have experienced stereotyping and sexualization, while another third felt that the music industry was male-dominated. Finally, a quarter expressed being the only woman present while in the

recording studio. Unfortunately, the overarching theme across the industry is that making music means conforming to society's view (EduBirdie). In the music industry, artists and performers are held to different standards, affecting how they act and are seen by the public.

Performers being viewed by the public eye drastically affects how they act and perform. Two of the strongest influenced parts of their art is how they dress and what lyrics they sing. Both are actively influenced by gender. In "All Hail the Queen" by Tamara Winfrey Harris, Harris investigates Beyonce's critics and explores why they disapprove of her. Beyonce, as a feminist icon, undergoes considerable criticism as well as admiration. Many critics call Beyonce a hypocrite as they believe she performs shows aimed for male attention while she proclaims to be a feminist (EduBirdie). In discrediting her for proclaiming and expressing her sexuality, the industry inherently reinforces gender roles and normalities. Cultural critics are "convinced Beyonce pops a leather-clad pelvis on stage... solely for the benefit of men," rather than for any other reason, such as confidence for herself or just for the sake of it (Harris, 265). When a man performs on stage, wearing baggy clothes, tight clothes, or any clothes for that matter, they are not judged and ridiculed for their choice in attire. The double standard for women, who are judged according to standards not applied to their male counterparts, means an industry full of inequality and inconsistencies. Beyonce's use of her body is condemned as thoughtless and without value beyond that of male entertainment (Harris). In providing a contemporary example to the antiquated roles of women in society, Beyonce's performances show that of a woman's sexuality versus the artistry that is viewed from audiences in a male artist's performance. Women in music are not seen as artists beyond that of their body and emotions.



Women artists are often relegated to being crazy and emotional. This goes beyond art and music. In society, women are usually deemed as too emotional or just “at that time of the month.” In claiming women are incapable of rational thought, men are able to rationalize their position of power (Grate). PMS, premenstrual syndrome, is the “name for symptoms women can experience in the weeks before their period” (National Health Service, UK). In making jokes regarding PMS, males discount a woman’s intelligence and potential (Grate, The Representation Project). In preventing women from being taken seriously, PMS jokes further allow the dismissal of women being taken seriously. Rationality is not lost just because a woman is menstruating. In music, women artists are often known for “lyrical feminism... and swings between fantasy”(Harris) or “serial daters” (Gomez).

Alternatively, male artists are not subjugated to being defined by their gender and gender expression. Take Taylor Swift, the public considers her as an idea and not a person (Gomez). Her construction and musical career are centered around her ability to date multiple men and have her musical storytelling about who she dates. Her songs idealize femininity and hinge on the understanding of being a woman. That said, Swift is not as regaled in the music industry as her male counterparts. She is seen in magazines and popular culture for who she is currently dating or what is occurring in her life. Another young woman artist, Billie Eilish is often criticized for her controversial music. In her dark lyrics, critics view Billie Eilish’s music as glorifying of suicide and consider her music too dark and unnerving (EduBirdie). With her angsty audience, it is a far cry from the popular love songs and pop songs. In writing and singing about everyday issues for herself, Billie Eilish receives a lot of backlash and hatred. While a man can write a song about his ex-girlfriend, and not have critics care, the backlash for women is much

more intense. So while some artists like Billie Eilish are comfortable pushing against the grain and not letting gender affect their music, most artists conform to the standards we see from other mainstream women artists (EduBirdie).

### *Social Media and the Dissemination of Music*

Social Media has affected the way we as a society function. With a new technological and social reality, we have profoundly changed the way we perceive and consume media, information, and art. Within music, the digital context has forced the music industry to reinvent itself (Alturas and Laureano). When revenues from musical content sales decreased, the industry had to vastly redesign how it marketed itself. In Portugal, the dissemination of musical events increased the attendance at music festivals and concerts. In Portugal, this mainly occurred through the use of social media, with Facebook being the main source (Alturas and Laureano). Facebook was used in order to discover and follow new music artists and enabled the sharing of music content and activities (Alturas and Laureano). In this sense, Facebook became the platform in Portugal that allowed consumers to share their favorite artists while also finding new artists, creating a new type of consumerism and new attitude towards music (Alturas and Laureano).

Facebook has more than 350 Million active users worldwide (Facebook Statistics, 2010). Profiles are used to communicate with friends and are used day to day to discuss events, organize groups, and keep in touch (Beer). Popular music artists use social media as a way to promote their brand and create cohesion within their fan base (Baym; Edlom and Karlsson). Engagement within social media platforms has become crucial to promotion and engagement

within today's day and time. With the shift to digital formats, the popular music industry had to create a change in behavioral consumption patterns, engagement, and behaviors. Social media has been decisive in more than one way. Most notably, is its inclusivity and reach. Traditionally marginalized groups have been able to reach larger audiences than that without social media (Verboord and van Noord). In being able to find a space and platform, social media has enabled a sense of widespread dissemination for places that are geographically disproportionate in popular music.

Composers and contemporary art musicians are less likely to embrace that of social media (Kreidler). As opposed to their pop music counterparts, contemporary music composers are far less versed and engaged in social media. For the composers who have engaged with social media, there are issues of copyright, surveillance, and composition to adhere to (Kreidler). In presenting contemporary art on social media, contemporary art music enters a different realm from that of Western pop music (Fryberger, Besada, Kanga). Social media enables artists to display a sampling of their work and allows them to secure influential status through amassing a mass amount of followers (Fryberger, Besada, Kanga). It is therefore now common practice for artists to maintain a large presence on social media, as it becomes and is seen as an extension of the artist and creative individual they are. Social media allows for new forms of interaction amongst composers, performers, and the audience, enabling music to gain new definitions for how it affects our day to day lives.

*K-Pop as a new form of Media*

The “Korean Wave” appeared around the 19th Century, rapidly spreading throughout Asia before expanding around the world with the use of mass media (Hu). Also referred to as “Hallyu,” South Korea pop culture has gained extreme prominence in Asia and in global culture, and is starting to rival that of its Western counterparts. A major driver of global culture, Hallyu has been dominating every part of Western culture. We see Korean dramas on Netflix, Korean skincare all over the beauty industry, and Korean cuisine in every major city (Romano). Most notably, the increasingly popular Korean pop music. Through the use of mass media technology, a new music genre, K-Pop, was created and spread in popularity. As a thriving industry that “jumped to a worth of over billions of dollars in less than a few decades” (SeventhQueen, Emerics Asia), K-Pop became a fast and highly influential form of music. Its rise to popularity primarily due to the mass media distribution and dissemination of music, K-Pop has become increasingly influential in the Western world. With social media such as YouTube, Korean pop music has been able to gain mass popularity around the Western world (Hu). Opening up markets for independent artists, and allowing large distribution of music, YouTube has fast-tracked the rise in popularity of Korean pop music.

K-Pop has quickly become a global phenomenon due to its “distinctive blend of addictive melodies, slick choreography and production values, and an endless parade of attractive Korean performers who spend years in grueling studio systems learning to sing and dance in synchronized perfection” (Romano). Within the past five to ten years, K-Pop has become a platform both visible and attractive to global audiences. From 2009 to 2018, South Korean artists have placed on the Billboard Hot 100s charts at least eight times (Romano). In a survey

conducted in 2020 by Towards Data Science, respondents were asked how long they had been familiar with K-Pop.

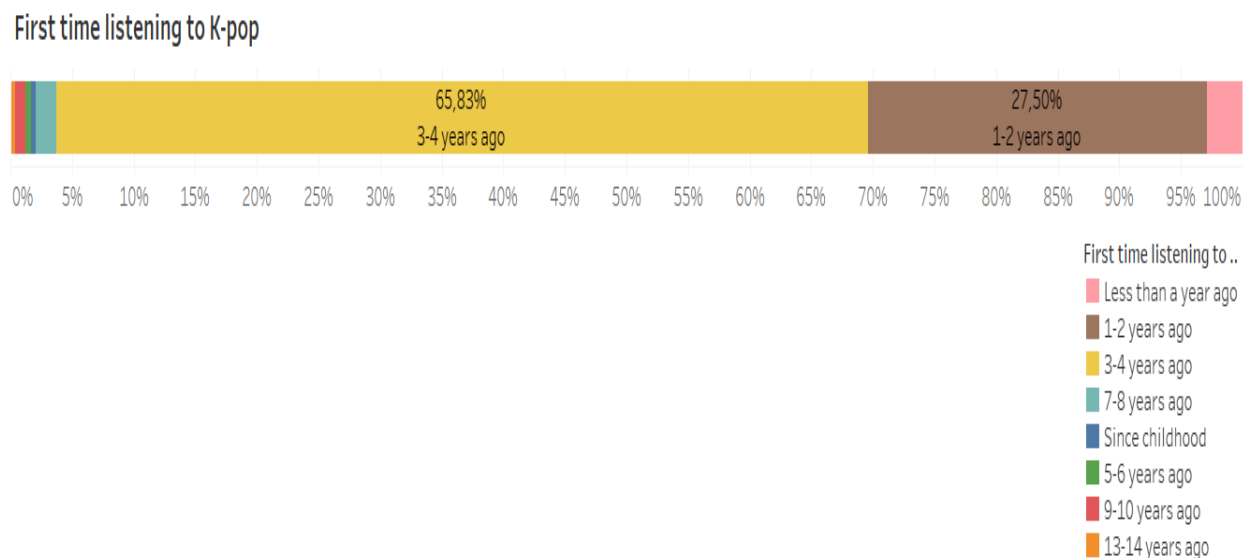


Figure 2: Towards Data Science, Image by Monica Indrawan (2021)

Based on the chart, a large percentage of respondents first got to know K-Pop around 3-4 years before the survey, roughly around 2016. This insight is supported by many K-Pop reaction videos found on Western YouTube channels (Indrawan). As of 2022, the K-Pop industry has expanded to a massive \$5 Billion dollar industry (Seoul Space). An average run for K-Pop groups, according to Seoul Space, is around eight years. With the internet and social media, the industry continues to grow and K-Pop idols share more and more details regarding their contracts and lives within their record deals.

During the 2022 World Cup, K-Pop had an enormous chance to shine. Jungkook, from BTS, performed during the 2022 FIFA World Cup opening ceremony. That performance, along with many other K-Pop performances throughout the World Cup allowed great representation for Korea and further expanded the reach to audiences around the world. During the 2018 Olympics, held in Pyeongchang, South Korea, K-Pop had a featured role. Athletes marched in the Parade of Nations accompanied by different K-Pop songs (Romano, Vox). With multiple songs and performers shown, South Korea gave the world a glimpse into their life, and showed a country “that’s a fully integrated part of the global culture” (Romano). K-Pop artists showed the world, at arguably one of the most internationally recorded and watched events, how strong they were as artists, singers, dancers, and performers. From catchy tunes and melodies, to talented dancers, K-Pop idols exhibited their talent at excelling at everything from rap and singing to dance and social networking. K-Pop has become the “international face of South Korea” and as a music industry, has been able to “earworm its way into your brain” (Romano). Due to its coordinated and strictly regimented system, the artists and idols of K-Pop are exceptionally talented and popular. South Korea has become known for its culture and K-Pop for its combination of talent “being ground through a very powerful stardom mill” (Romano).

### *Gender Gap within K-pop*

The popularity and success rates of K-Pop groups and solo artists undoubtedly rests on their ability to fit into the gender roles that “constitute appropriate behaviour for men and women” (Godbole). The K-Pop industry has a very distinct and specific way it portrays the bodies of women and men and its use in marketing and social media strategy differ greatly. In

talking about the K-Pop industry, it is almost impossible to not discuss agency. Both the presence and non presence of agency is something that weighs heavily in K-Pop culture. Additionally, discrimination based on gender, age, and sexualization is significant to talk about. Gender roles in Korean society and in the Korean labor market assume that males are given more freedom while women are often restricted to that of systemic patriarchal standards (Jonas). By providing men more space to operate in society, women are usually limited to jobs that are not taken as seriously as that of a man's work. The market becomes feminized, and employers justify actions with this standard that women's labor is not worth as much as a man's (Jonas).

In K-Pop and the idol industry, this is translated with the de-aging and infantilization of women for the male gaze (Jonas). In making a women K-Pop idol more young, available, and attractive, they offer the audience a desirable and attainable commodity without challenging the cultural gender norms. In comparison, male K-Pop idols are not forced to uphold the male gaze. Male K-Pop idols do not need to stay young and instead continue their career, well into "old" age and are seen as still successful regardless of their outward appearance. In comparison, women K-Pop idols are expected to experience other life events as they age, subsequently leaving the K-Pop industry as they no longer fit into the standard beauty expectations and requirements. With the K-Pop industry based on the male gaze, women idols are restricted to one of three main concepts: cute, hip-hop (typically depicted in a rapper or grunge aesthetic), or sexy (Jonas). Males however, are free to encompass any multitude of contexts or images, often changing throughout their time as idols. K-Pop boy groups portray ideas such as boyfriends, gangsters, action stars, superheroes, and men in uniforms. They are not stuck in one

concept or definition for their entire career. Comparably, K-Pop girl groups often sing about crushes, relationships, and breakups; all in connection to a male figure (Jonas). K-Pop boy groups however, have much more autonomy. They do sing about the typical love songs, however, they also explore mental health, generational struggles, bullying, as well as the education system (Big Hit Entertainment, 2020). I believe this difference stems from the traditional understanding in Asian gender roles that men should be taken more seriously than women.

Clothing and choreography is another significant gender gap between K-Pop girl and boy groups. While men are more likely to be dressed “smarter” in outfits that convey more control, women are more likely to be dressed in far more revealing clothes (Jonas). Additionally, in looking at music videos and choreography from popular K-Pop bands, one can see the difference in style and choreography between male and women K-Pop groups. Whereas boy groups often incorporate influences from breakdancing and acrobatics, girl groups stick to elementary gestures and movements. K-Pop girl groups’ choreography is straightforward and looks similar to that of “an arsenal of synchronized swimming techniques” (Jonas). This, combined with sexualized movements, does not showcase the K-Pop girl groups to their full potential. Instead, it shows them dancing and performing for the male gaze. This goes beyond that of an audience; often women are faced with that of a double standard. Holiday and Elfving-Hwang suggest that from a young age, often in grade school, women are faced with the weaponization of their bodies against themselves (Holiday and Elfving-Hwang). Most women in South Korea, often from the pressure of the media and society, see themselves as fat, giving the reasoning that “guys prefer skinny bodies” (Jonas). This further perpetuates the idea of



patriarchal gender roles and a woman's worth being found in relation to that of a man (Won, 2015). With women idol groups being marketed within traditional gender roles, they lack a lot of agency and autonomy. While boy group content can still be marketed towards a woman's gaze, they are accorded a predominately male creative staff and hold a certain amount of agency towards their own choices and decisions (Jonas). K-Pop girl groups lack a lot of the agency that K-Pop boy groups are afforded in their lyrics, public interactions, and body movements (Jonas). In not being able to have complete autonomy over their creative processes, K-Pop girl groups and idols lose the chance to portray themselves in their own authentic way. They lose the ability to show their own lived experiences and stories (Jonas). On V Live, a live video platform where South Korean celebrities interact with fans, Jennie from BLACKPINK shared that her things would go missing. In a building where only authorized individuals could enter, her notebook and pens would be presumably stolen. These notebooks are rumored to have unreleased songs that she wrote. In this live video, she was understandably upset and posted a sign on her door saying "things are going missing, don't touch them."

## Case Studies

In looking at two case studies, I aim to answer these questions. I use two easy case studies to highlight the notion that K-Pop groups have different understandings and social expectations from a male versus women perspective. I will use the most popular boy group and girl group to highlight the differences between the gendering of K-Pop. For the boy band, I will be focusing on BTS, **Bangtan Sonyeondan**. For the girl group, I will be looking at **BLACKPINK**. Both are incredibly famous and have huge followings and fanbases. Recently, in late August of 2022, BLACKPINK surpassed BTS as the number one Best K-Pop singers. This was due to the group gaining popularity at a rate of 213.47% as opposed to BTS's 38.84% increase (Wion News). While BTS had their first debut in 2013, BLACKPINK alternatively didn't have their first debut until 2016. BTS is a 7 member group. Alternatively, BLACKPINK has only 4 members. Both K-Pop groups are prolific, as well as famous internationally. Additionally, both K-Pop groups have a solid social standing as well as a strong social media presence.

### *BTS*

#### *Established*

The Bangtan Boys or Bulletproof Boy Scouts, otherwise known as BTS, consist of seven members: Jin, Suga, J-Hope, RM, Jimin, V, and Jungkook. Formed in 2010 under Big Hit Entertainment, BTS is a South Korean boy band. Originally a hip-hop group, BTS has now become a multi-style pop group. Co-writing and co-producing most of their own material, the seven members' music incorporates love, relationships, loss, mental health, and individuality

(Big Hit Entertainment, 2020). After debuting in 2013 with their album *2 Cool 4 Skool*, it wasn't until they released their album *Wings* in 2016 that they started to gain a mass following. Selling one million copies in South Korea, *Wings* became the start of BTS breaking boundaries (Jun, Soompi). By 2017, BTS had started to emerge in the United States music industry and market and had established a name for themselves both nationally and internationally.

### *Level of Popularity over Time*

BTS was able to become so strong and widespread so fast, partly due to their branding as a band. Big Hit Entertainment wanted to highlight the boys as “real boys who shared their authentic personalities and talents with the world” (Romano). In doing so, BTS was attainable and similar to the everyday person. BTS member Jin was literally picked up off the streets by a casting agent for his good looks (Interview, Lee). BTS came across as genuine and sincere, not the unattainable and pristine idols of other studios and bands. They were surprisingly normal. This approach was different from the norm but allowed the viewer and audience to project a fantasy upon the BTS boys. In order to create this establishment where the boys were not groomed and immaculate, Big Hit Entertainment had to change the precedents for how the idol group was treated (Romano). BTS didn't have the average experience that many other K-Pop groups had. In a social way, they still had to follow the standard rules of the industry, but from an artistic standpoint, they were given more freedom. BTS members were allowed to write their own songs and given freedom to explore many challenging topics. In being more open and accessible to fans and opening up to struggles through their music, they were able to discuss the pressures that came from being an idol and just an everyday person (Romano). In enabling

the Korean stars to be natural, open, and honest, Big Hit Entertainment gave the viewers and listeners something genuinely unique. The band was able to perform without the typical cultural pressure and were able to discuss different complicated topics both in interviews and through their music (Romano).

### *Social Media Presence*

It was the BTS bands' presence on social media that allowed them to communicate with a broader audience that they were as real as they were being portrayed to be. By being so open and honest on social media, and having that frankness reflected in their lyrics as well, the audience saw a band that was about more than fame or money. In owning their start as a band that wasn't very established, they found other ways to become popular. They were a band that shared everything through the substance of their music and their openness on social media. In 2021, BTS had 70.9 million searches a month on YouTube, meaning roughly 2.3 million people searched about BTS daily (AnnelleDigital). In comparison to other K-Pop industry bands and idols, BTS was one of the only bands to rely extensively on YouTube and Twitter to promote themselves (AnnelleDigital). Whereas other artists used Korean tv shows and news channels, BTS was a small independent group that had very few resources. In using social media, BTS developed their brand identity by regularly posting videos, selfies, and group photos. Having one account for all seven members, fans were able to find details about the band in one consolidated place, making them feel more cohesive as a group. While first starting out, BTS was invited to different variety shows in Korea. However, they were not treated very well on these programs and were often bullied and disrespected by the hosts and producers of these Korean

variety shows. Because of this, they ended up starting their own variety web series, Run BTS! (Interview, Lee). This allowed fans insight into their day to day life beyond that of their life on stage. ARMYs, the name for people a part of the BTS fanbase, were able to feel closer to members, as if they were a friend sharing a web call (AnnelleDigital). As their fame grew, BTS began to premier in different TV shows and YouTube videos, with producers not daring to disrespect them like in their early rise to fame due to their vast fan base of supporters (Interview, Lee).



Image 1: BTS members in promotional poster for their South Korean reality series, *In the Soop*

### *Audience*

The BTS ARMY, a devoted fan base with unrivaled members, is one of the most talked about fan bases in the music industry. Promoted to fame after the 2017 Billboard Music Awards,

ARMY single handedly voted the band to win the fan-voted Top Social Artist, with more than 300 million votes (Moon). As of 2020, there were an estimated 40 million members of the BTS ARMY. As an audience, ARMY stands apart from other music fans due to its desire to see BTS “leave their mark in territories previously uncharted by any other pop act from South Korea” (Moon). The BTS ARMY has an unparalleled level of organization and drive to make the BTS boys succeed (Moon). Charting records all over the world, BTS became the first artist in the world to sell out 4 concerts at Los Angeles’ SoFi stadium, achieving the highest ticket sales among any show held by an artist or band at the stadium (Kim). BTS also topped the YouTube record for most-viewed video in a 24 hour release with over 101 million views on their video “Dynamite” (Choi). Their first song entirely in English, “Dynamite” allowed BTS to gain an even more substantial following internationally and pushed K-Pop music further into the spotlight. “Dynamite” was a way to connect to their international fans, prioritizing a global audience, breaking through to “overcome this emptiness and powerlessness” of global communication (Jimin, BTS Member).

#### *Autonomy or a lack thereof*

As a boy group, BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan), is held to strict rules in the K-Pop community as well as to their record label. For one thing, the BTS members are not allowed to date. This is seen as a publicity and marketing stunt. Because the boys are not allowed to date, they are “open and available” to the public and to their fanbase. This allows for an idolship and the fanbase to imagine themselves as future significant others to the members. This is also seen as a way to improve their practice. So long as the boys have more commitment to the

other members and not to a partner, they are focusing on their career and on their success as a K-Pop band. Another stringent factor in BTS is the policy for no scandals. This ranges from drugs, alcohol, partying, to political views, relationships, and generally anything that could be bad for the brand. This is mainly due to the fact that negative headlines are not good for the brand. The BTS label is strict and at the end of the day has multiple artists on their label and any bad press doesn't look good for the company. Big Hit Entertainment, the record label, also mandates that the members work out and train extensively. This follows the idea that the boy's image is essential to both the brand as well as the fanbase. Especially before a comeback, the BTS boys will be required to train extra hard and eat well and from pre-approved diet foods. Asian beauty standards and diet culture is incredibly harmful to K-Pop idols. Jimin, one of the BTS members, went on a self-proclaimed diet before the debut of *Blood, Sweat and Tears*. This diet consisted of one meal every 10 days. This caused him to faint after rehearsals and be very weak with low energy. He said in a later interview with Spotify that "I was pretty sensitive during my diet. When we practiced the choreography together, I was the only one knocked over, not because I was hungry but because I had no strength" (Jimin, Spotify). This worried the other members and they urged him to stop but he was convinced he needed to do it to look handsome (Interview, Lee). Another non-confirmed rule of the group is presenting on screen as individuals. While some members have features on songs with other artists, at the beginning of their career, none of the BTS members were in music videos without the other members present. This went back to the notion that the boys must be seen as a group rather than as individuals. This has more recently become untrue as the members move to more solo careers, releasing singles and dropping music as individual artists in addition to the BTS band.



## *BLACKPINK*

### *Established*

BLACKPINK is a more recent K-Pop girl group. Consisting of four members: Jennie, Lisa, Jisoo, and Rosé, BLACKPINK debuted in 2016 under YG Entertainment (BlackPink Fandom). The four members of BLACKPINK were trainees at YG Entertainment for years before they came together and debuted as a group. Jennie had the most prolonged training period in BLACKPINK at 5 years and 11 months (Chino). Lisa joined YG Entertainment in 2011 and trained for 5 years and 3 months. As an artist, she was highly specialized in dance and had an immense potential for being an idol. Since debuting with BLACKPINK, Lisa has also made her solo debut, dropping her single album, *Lalisa*, in September of 2021 (Kostopoulos). Jisoo trained for 5 years and 1 month with YG Entertainment. And finally, Rosé debuted with the shortest time, having only trained with YG Entertainment for 4 years and 2 months. The BLACKPINK debut was heavily promoted in the K-Pop scene as BLACKPINK was YG Entertainment's first girl group in over seven years (Mason).

### *Level of Popularity over Time*

On BLACKPINK's mini album debut in 2016, their song "Boombayah" topped the charts at No. 1 on the Billboard's World Digital Songs chart (Mason). From there, their popularity continued to grow with additional releases in 2017. As the first girl group from YG Entertainment in seven years, there was a lot of hype and expectations of the group. BLACKPINK has managed to surpass all expectations, and in the past six years, become one the most popular K-Pop girl bands in the world (Glasby). BLACKPINK was the first K-Pop girl group to play

at Coachella, to reach 1 billion YouTube views, and to be the first girl group from any country on *Forbes Asia's* 30 Under 30 list. Additionally, they are the most-subscribed music group on YouTube, standing at 83.1 Million subscribers (Wikipedia). From their first debut in August of 2016, BLACKPINK has a lot of hype surrounding them (Glasby). Coming from a prominent label, they did not have too many introductions necessary. Instead, their name and who trained them allowed them a leg up on that of their competition. BLACKPINK made a name for themselves as a group who had many soloists, but soloists that came together as a group incredibly strongly. No one member danced more than the others, nor sang more than the others. "BLACKPINK's harmony is complete because of each person's energy' (Glasby). As a group, they had the need for each other, regardless of their own personal talents, in order to create and complete a group chemistry that was so appealing and endearing to millions of fans (Glasby). A constant criticism of BLACKPINK as it grew in fans and popularity, was its commitment to only releasing one release per year. The fandom had to wait months for a new single, and while this was common due to fewer K-Pop groups fighting for a share in the market (Glasby), YG Entertainment, one of the oldest K-Pop agencies, committed to a plan where less was more for BLACKPINK. This created an air of heightened demand and desire for the group. BLACKPINK was making headlines, and comebacks allowed the group to stay popular as the seduction of a new release teased fans and got them re-excited for something new and different.

### *Social Media Presence*

Similar to the boys group BTS, BLACKPINK also uses social media in order to keep fans eager and wanting more. Often, similar to other K-Pop groups, BLACKPINK will release practice

videos of the group practicing their choreography (Mason). This enables their fans to stay up to date on what the girl group is working on and allow them into their group. BLACKPINK fans also love to watch what is known as “fancams.” These are concert videos that focus on one member of the group's performance, highlighting one member at a time (Mason). There are countless videos of these fancam’s on YouTube. Beyond their presence on YouTube, BLACKPINK has also had a documentary aired on Netflix, *Light Up The Sky*. This documentary is the first look into the inner workings of the band. The documentary shows the behind-the-scenes personalities of the members and offers the pressures and fulfillment of their life as idols (Mason). Unlike when BTS first started out, BLACKPINK members did have their own social media accounts in addition to their band profile (Lindsay). This allowed fans to keep up to date with each individual member and follow them into their personal lives beyond that within the group.



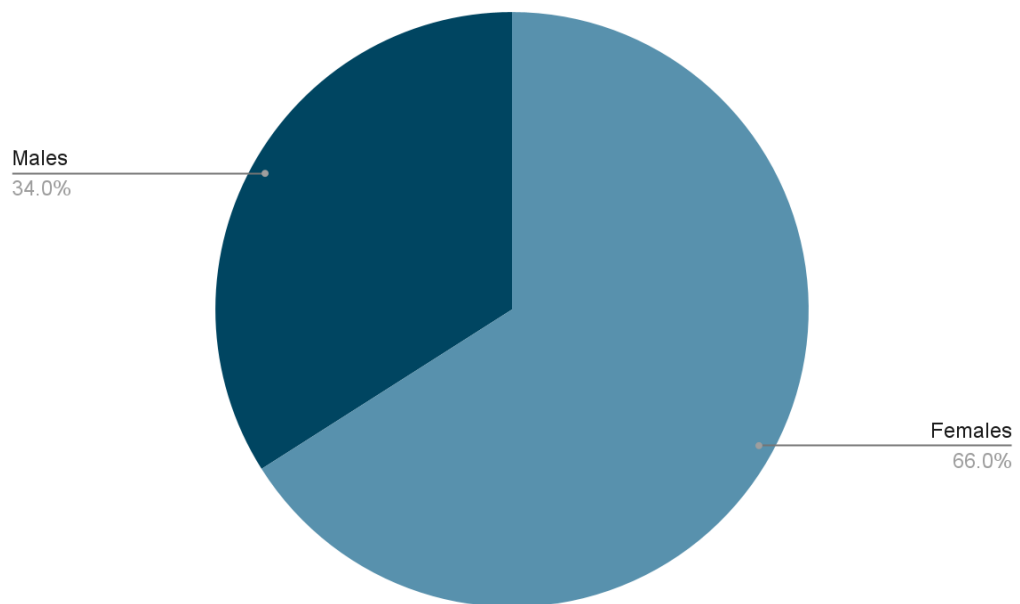
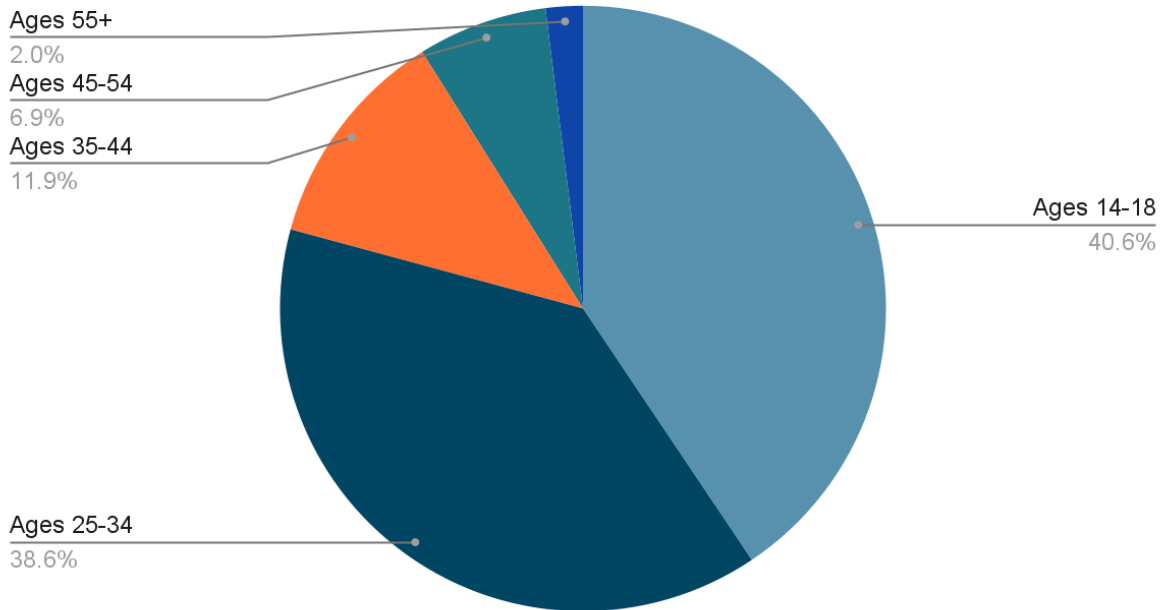
Image 2: BLACKPINK members in promotional image from Netflix documentary, *Light Up The Sky*

### *Audience*

Blink, the fandom name for BLACKPINK's fans, is a combination of "black" and "pink" (Wilson-Taylor). In K-Pop, the name of the fanbase gets decided by the group's company. Typically, the announcement of the fandom name will be released shortly after a group's official debut. In this way, it makes the act of being a fan more appealing and more official. As part of a group, one that is named on the artists' behalf, the fans feel that they are welcome and have a

relationship with their idols. In giving the BLACKPINK girl group's fans the name Blinks, the company gave BLACKPINK a fan name that could surpass any continent or language (Geddo). An accessible name that isn't difficult to speak, all fans could find a place and meaning within what it means to be a BLACKPINK fan. There are many events that BLACKPINK hosts for their Blinks. Both online and in person, these events are aimed specifically for and at fans, allowing them to get closer to the idols (Geddo). According to data from Vivid Seats, BLACKPINK Blinks and audience members are typically of the younger woman population (Suacillo). For the ticket demographic in the United States, 41 percent of the site's overall traffic was for audiences between the ages of 14-18 years old. Another 39 percent of traffic was from audiences aged 25-34 years old, 12 percent of audiences aged between 35-44 years old, and only 7 percent of audiences between 45-55 years old. Audiences over 55 years old only accounted for 2 percent of the site's traffic. Additionally, 66 percent of traffic to the BLACKPINK ticket page came from women, with only 34 percent from males. In the United States, the top majority of Blinks reside in Texas, with the majority in Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston, and Austin (Suacillo).

## BLACKPINK Audience



Figures 3 and 4: Data collected from traffic to BLACKPINK tickets page on Vivid Seats, according to Google Analytics (HelloKPop, 2019).

### *Autonomy or a lack thereof*

Similar to BTS, BLACKPINK has rules regarding what they are or aren't allowed to do. The principal rules for the girl group is no drinking, driving, or dating. I think one of the most significant differences between BTS and BLACKPINK is the difference in body image. While both need to be in prime condition and shape for dancing, girl groups are way more encouraged to go on diets. There are hundreds of YouTube videos of young girls and youtubers trying out different diets that members of BLACKPINK do prior to a comeback. The emphasis on body image and the audience perspective of only wanting thin girls is harming and damaging to society. But it is also perpetuated within Asian society and culture. Additionally, the fanbase is much to blame. The fanbase for K-Pop music is majority women. As such, the record labels and management like to push a rhetoric of what the ideal women body should look like. This ends up with the idols pushing themselves to produce a body and the fanbase wanting to emulate that body. Alternatively, in boy groups, there is the want to create a body that is attractive to the woman's gaze. And yet, this rhetoric of a fat-shaming and paper-thin individual is not copied.

### *Choreography*

Another significant difference between BTS and BLACKPINK, is the dancing and choreography. While BTS has strongly influenced dances and often very intricate and challenging steps, the BLACKPINK dances are relatively tame and full of cutesy arm movements and non-challenging dance moves. While this makes it easier for fans to copy and emulate, it does not allow the BLACKPINK members to fully express themselves and use their full potential.

This is obvious due to some of the BLACKPINK members having their own separate dance accounts. In the dance videos that are not directly linked to BLACKPINK, the girls are doing way more challenging and demanding movements. Their technique and style is flawless, and yet their record label is holding them back and making them less of a threat to other groups. They are being put into the category of cute and less challenging.



## Analysis

In comparing BTS and BLACKPINK, I wanted to define the differences between being a K-Pop boy group versus a K-Pop girl group. One of the main differences between BTS and BLACKPINK is that BTS writes a lot of their own songs. This enables them to further connect with their songs and their audience. They receive a lot of autonomy and freedom to express themselves and show their audience who they truly are. As such, their audience views them as personable, and easy to relate to. In comparison, BLACKPINK's songs are pretty basic and categorized as generic girl-pop. While they have incredibly catchy rhythms and consistently top the charts, they lack the depth and emotion that we see in BTS's songs. Another difference between the two groups is their audience. BTS has die hard fans that have been known to protect the boys with extreme loyalty, going as far as to shame TV producers who hated on them before they were famous (Interview, Lee). While BLACKPINK also has fans that love them, they lack the gender breakdown that BTS fans have. In general, more K-Pop boy groups have a larger fanbase with both men and women than K-Pop girl groups (Interview, Lee). I believe this can be attributed to the social norms we see in different cultures and the gender roles present in every society.

The popularity and success of K-Pop groups and solo singers rests on their ability to “fit into the moulds of what constitutes appropriate behaviour for men and women” (Godbole).

In looking at the gender disparity within music, and more specifically K-Pop, I determined that gender roles depend on your location and societal views. With extreme Asian beauty standards, K-Pop idols feel the need to match a portfolio and image that society deems as acceptable. Both men and women artists felt the pressure to conform to different rules and social norms. The difference between male and women K-Pop idols was the level of support

they received when they struggled to conform to these ideals. In Western culture, it is not as accepted to be an effeminate male. In Asian and European culture, those standards are more fluid, with males having more close bonds with other males. Male K-Pop idols are seen hugging, sharing beds, wearing makeup, and dyeing their hair. In comparison to Western culture where men are traditionally expected to act strong and unemotional, male idols are encouraged to perform aegyo (애교), which means behaving in a flirtatious, coquettish manner. For male K-Pop idols, their fanbase in both Korea and America is mainly women. For women K-Pop idols their fan base in Korea is primarily male, but in America it is mainly women.

This breakup of fan genders means a disproportionate amount of support for women versus male idols. K-Pop male idols receive a lot of hate from Westernized ideals. They often get victimized from the necessity of acting cute and portraying a more loveable identity. However, no Asian male is going to bash the K-Pop male idols for not being more manly. In Asian society, they aren't going to be hated for being too pretty or being too soft and elegant. For women K-Pop idols, they receive a lot more support from Western culture and more hate from Asian society culture. As a woman in K-Pop, there are extreme beauty standards regarding weight and physical beauty. It is standard to encourage cosmetic appearance alterations and weight-loss diets. Women K-Pop idols face a lot of stigmas and demands for a certain weight or specific look. So while in the Western world gaining weight and becoming "curvy" is a good thing (think of the Kim Kardashian body), in Asian culture being paper-thin and stick-like is the ideal. Weight gain is portrayed so negatively in Korean and Asian cultures, whereas in the United States and in Western culture no one will think the artist should be less successful due to the fact they look different.

In looking at the gender disproportion in K-Pop, I found that the main difference lies in what the Idols' support system looks like. The targeted audience of K-Pop really affected the way the idols were received and represented. Male K-Pop idols were marketed towards women in both Asia and America. Whereas women K-Pop idols were marketed to men in Asia and

women in America. While the fanbase slightly differed between gender, most K-Pop artists had a primary audience in Korea and less reach internationally. I believe this is attributed to the language barrier and lack of understanding amongst non-Korean speaking audiences. Most of the K-Pop bands promote themselves in Korean first, with English being secondary. While some artists do understand English, it is relatively basic, making it harder for idols to truly connect with their international audience. The idols often rely on translators or translation aspects of social media to interact with English speaking fans. As such, a vast majority of K-Pop social media fan comments are written in Korean. English speaking fans are not a small number, however, the first and foremost fans of K-Pop are Korean speaking individuals.

## **Conclusion**

This research aimed to identify the correlation between gender norms and perspectives broadly within the music industry and focused within K-Pop.

These differences in boy and girl K-Pop groups lie the foundation for why I believe gender plays such a large role in music and popular culture today. Specifically in K-Pop, we can see that gender forces a preconception of an idea and persuades an audience to see what they want to see. In perpetuating that idea, the record labels and people in charge further push the boundary of what is expected and what the fanbase expects to see. In putting boy groups and girl groups on different playing fields, they are not truly giving the groups an equal chance of success and popularity.

K-Pop artists, both men and women, are forced to reproduce and uphold traditional gender roles within their art. In being forced to conform to society's pressures, they are ensuring that they have the highest chance for success. The difference lies within the reception they receive from their audiences. The Korean audience for K-Pop is very different from the K-Pop audience in the United States. The Korean audience has more subconscious societal biases from Asian beauty standards while the American audience has more subconscious biases that come from traditional gender roles. Male K-Pop artists often find themselves ridiculed by men in Western societies, while women K-Pop artists find themselves berated by both men and women in Asian societies. Similarly, both men and women in K-Pop find their support from the opposite audience. Men in K-Pop receive more praise from the men in Asian communities than

from men in Western communities. However women in K-Pop receive more praise from the women in Western societies than that from women in Asian communities.

I believe the women in K-Pop have a harder time with idol hood and fame. While both genders receive hate and praise, it is the women that face a more challenging time in K-Pop. In reproducing traditional gender roles in K-Pop, the women are forced to uphold traditional Asian beauty standards. They must look a certain way in order to perform and often force themselves upon horrendous diets that are not safe for their health and wellbeing. A girl group member of Sistar, Kim Da-som, said "In order to lose weight in a short period of time, starvation is the most effective." Even after extreme dieting, K-Pop women idols are often subjected to ridicule and body shaming by audiences. TWICE, another K-Pop girl group, member Jeongyeon was so heavily criticized and fat-shamed for gaining weight. She went viral for gaining weight with video titles, "Thinnest v Thickest moments," "What happened to Jeongyeon," and "Jeongyeon's bad outfits and fat phobia" harassing her for her change in appearance. It is sad that the standards in K-Pop are almost impossible to reach. While male idols go through similar body shaming, I believe they receive more support from audiences than women idols. I believe this stems back to the fanbase that the male idols have. Male K-Pop idols have support from women in both Asian and Western cultures. Whereas women K-Pop idols only have support from women in Western cultures. I believe the Asian rhetoric and Asian beauty standards are incredibly detrimental to K-Pop artists and hinders the success rate of K-Pop artists. While women have a more challenging time in the industry, both genders face a significant amount of stress and societal pressures that stem from traditional gender roles in society. That said, the support that male K-Pop idols receive as compared to women K-Pop idols is very different and is highlighted

in the audience breakdown and the amount of autonomy they receive as both artists and individuals.

In this thesis I questioned whether gender had an effect on the levels of success and popularity of K-Pop idols. In comparing BTS and BLACKPINK and their audiences and fanbases, I determined that support presents very differently for men and women in K-Pop. Men in K-Pop have a more extensive support base than that of women in K-Pop. This has a broader implication when discussing Asian beauty and Asian standards and gender roles. Men are seen in a more positive light in Asian societies and are often worth more to families than women. I believe that we can draw parallels to gender roles in society and argue that men in Asian cultures are often providers and women are weak. In discussing K-Pop, and music, I argue that women are generally not perceived as as valid or certified in art as their male counterparts. I believe women are not given as many resources or opportunities within music as that of men. As such, it makes it harder for women to be successful, explaining why there is a plethora of male artists to that of women artists. I believe it is an institutional idea that women can not be as successful as men due to the strict gender roles defined in society.

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