

**The Emergence of K-pop in the Western Market:  
Making Meaning Through Western K-pop Fans on Twitter**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to understand K-pop and its relation to the Western market as it has completely altered what we have previously believed to be true about the monopoly that countries such as the United States have had on global media flow. The culture imperialist position of the West is challenged with the current relevance of Korean popular music, giving us the opportunity to study K-pop as a possible example of counter cultural imperialism. This project is conducted by studying and observing Western K-pop fans on Twitter and analyzing reoccurring themes expressed by them on the platform in relation to the groups chosen for this study – GOT7 and BTS – to make meaning and identify what has made K-pop so successful and economically profitable in the West. This research provides an intervention into K-pop's place in the Western market and help equip researchers to further understand the everchanging global market.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

K-Pop: Korean Popular Music

# Chapter 1: Introduction

Our media is American and Western dominated. So much so that it has gone on to influence other cultures and individuals' way of life around the world. The promise of globalization to provide cultural exchange does not appear to be successful based on the imbalance of the type of media that is consumed on the global market, the West emerging as victorious. This impact has caused the weakening of cultures and the production of smaller regional markets to have more of a difficult time breaking through to become transnational. Many countries have no choice but to consume Western media with much of it being at a low cost, making it much more cost effective than producing their own cultural products. The vast resources financially at the level of production and distribution, make the West a superpower for creating media content and the dominant source that is consumed globally. Primarily the United States and the United Kingdom have become the ideal or standard in what defines media and popular culture transnationally.

However, what if that is no longer the case? What if there is a newly prevailing regional market that has emerged? One that has had a sudden arrive and become a competitor for Western products not only in non-Western countries, but in the U.S., Europe and Canada as well? This has been the case with the Korean market and the recent global popularity of its export of K-pop. Despite all of the roadblocks that should have hindered Korean popular music – K-pop as it is known globally – from becoming popular in Western countries, it has somehow grown to be an international phenomenon that is economically profitable in the markets it occupies.

Thus, I have chosen to study K-pop in the Western market and its sudden catapult into the mainstream of these countries. Through virtual ethnography and the content analysis of K-pop fans in online spaces, I will attempt to make meaning of why Korean popular music has become a success in a market that is typically only dominated by its own media and own ideologies. As well as this, it is an aim to understand whether this emergence of a regional market from the East could be considered a blueprint of reverse cultural imperialism for other markets to follow or simply a fleeting moment in time.

## Research Questions

**Main:** Why has K-pop emerged as popular culture in Western markets that have historically been dominated by Western made media content?

**Sub:** Is this an instance of reverse cultural imperialism or something else entirely?

## Scope

This study explores the sudden relevance and the emergence into popular culture of K-pop in the Western market from 2017 to 2020, which is described as Hallyu 2.0 (Jin & Yoon, 2016; Ahn, Oh & Kim, 2013; Anderson, 2014). Hallyu meaning the export of Korean culture and products to other parts of the world. Although other regional markets have appeared in the West, they are typically considered as subcultures that are not identifiable as a part of the dominant parent culture. It is not often that a subculture has warranted enough attention in the West to emerge itself into the mainstream and later attempt to be consumed by the dominant media. This is what we are seeing with K-pop.

The fans of two Korean boybands will be studied, BTS and GOT7. Boybands have been chosen over girl groups for this project based on the fact that collectively it has been the Korean boybands that have appeared more widely in mainstream in the West and received more economic success. In a conversation with *The Korea Times*, Seattle based music critic Kim Young-dae illustrated how the origins of the Korean music industry were mostly male musicians from the start, garnering mostly female fans (Dong, 2020, para. 11). “Therefore, the main consumers of the music have been young girls and the industry has evolved in a way that can appeal to their taste. Almost all music-related businesses, such as merchandise and concerts, have been customized to suit female followers” (Dong, 2020, para 11). Females are more likely to be associated with fandom and young girls are more typical to put their attention towards male artists and boybands in this case. Which is why in the Western market, comparatively boy groups have sold more albums and accumulated larger ticket sales for their concerts. Hence, these statistics lead us to infer that the Western fans of Korean boybands are a better group to study.

The BTS fans known as “Army” and the GOT7 fans known as “IGOT7” or “Ahgase” on the social media platform Twitter will be studied based on a mixture of random and purposeful selection that will later be discussed in the methodology section of this project. The justifications as well for the boy groups chosen and the period of time this study was conducted will also be covered more thoroughly in the methodology portion of the study.



## Aims and Objectives

The objectives of this study are to understand why within the last five years there has been a rise in a regional market that is not from a Western country. While we have seen various regional markets become transnational and do increasingly well in countries with smaller markets, this has not occurred with a non-Western regional market in Western countries. For example, we have seen the Indian film industry known as Bollywood garner popularity in various markets such as Southeast Asia, East Asia and Africa. However, in comparison Bollywood has not achieved the same amount of success globally or in the Western market such as the American film industry has.

One of our aims is to find what exactly it is about K-pop – a cultural export from the East – that has caused it to infiltrate the Western market. Not only this, but how Western fans who are typically conditioned into consuming Western content that greatly differs from the ideologies, values and cultural content of exports from the East, were able to classify themselves as “fans.”

As well as this, our other major objective is to identify whether Korean popular music is counter cultural imperialism based on the communication between fans and what subjects they discuss on Twitter. Understanding K-pop’s place in the Western and global market as reverse cultural imperialism through fandom I believe is a great avenue for widening up further studies based on fans rather than empirical data in the media. As the fans are the ones would supposedly be the subjects who initiated this cultural imperialism due to how secure and imperialistic the Western market typically is.

Accomplishing these aims and objectives through observing K-pop fans, will tell us whether this instance of Korean popular music on the global stage and in places such as the United States and United Kingdom is evidence that despite the West’s power, it is possible for regional markets to succeed on the same scale. This case study on K-pop might indicate a new era of regional markets, a shift in the type of content Western fans want to consume and perhaps a two-way flow of media in the global market.

## Background and Context

### *The Cultural Imperialism of the West*

Through globalization there has been the false promises of a larger cultural and global exchange – but we have not necessarily seen this notion quite yet. This exchange has indeed occurred at some level through avenues such as Netflix, but the market is still predominately Western. To Schiller (1989) as quoted by Collin Sparks (2007), the USA is “the country that had gone furthest along the road to corporate control” (p.91). An imperialist control leaves little room to theorize that the cultural products of one country in comparison to the United States is balanced. For perspective, the top ten highest grossing films worldwide (not counting inflation) are all American, with the number ten spot belonging to *Black Panther* grossing \$1.342 billion worldwide (Clark & Lynch, 2019, para. 6). The top grossing non-English film of all time *Wolf Warrior 2* from China grossed \$870 million (Box Office Mojo). This is a very large gap, especially when the United States only has a population of 328.2 million compared to China’s 1.393 billion. Therefore, this tells us that worldwide American and Western media is being consumed at a larger rate and what is being produced by these Western media companies is preferred globally.

The Swedish streaming company Spotify, which has a catalog of over 60 million songs and is available in 92 countries, annually releases a review of their most streamed songs and artists. For 2019, four of the top five most streamed artists globally were either from the United States or the United Kingdom (Spotify, 2019). All top five of the most streamed songs of the year, however, were all in English and had artists hailing from the two aforementioned countries. Since 2019 also marked the ending of a decade, Spotify also released a review of the top streaming statistics from the last ten years. The five most streamed artists of the decade, worldwide, were all once again from the United States or United Kingdom, the same occurrence for the most streamed songs of the decade.

These examples show what many scholars and theorists have described as “cultural imperialism” (Boyd-Barrett 1977; Hamelink 1983; Schiller 1969; Smythe 1981). To further illustrate this, let us look at what the concept “imperialism” suggests. In comparison to “colonialism,” imperialism is a more comprehensive version that aims to implement social systems of power rather than physical structures. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we can see how everlasting imperialism is on certain areas that had once been under the control of imperialist powers such as the United Kingdom. Countries such as India and Hong Kong still recognize

English as one of the official languages used by the government due to their imperialist past with Great Britain. While we do not see as obvious examples as this now in 2020, there are subtle version of imperialism that live beneath the surface.

The power the West has over what is popular media or what becomes the most profitable and valued media on the global market is tremendous. One can consider this to be a form of imperialism that is “cultural” as the majority of ideologies and cultural ideas that are being shared are from the Western countries since their media is what is showcased. Cultural imperialism as a term has also been criticized for not being specific enough and too broad in its application. Which is why Boyd-Barrett (1977) goes on to define “media imperialism,” as “a process whereby the ownership, structure, distribution or content of the media in any one country are singly or together subject to substantial pressure from the media interests of any other country or countries without proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country so affected” (p.117). This definition is applicable to what is occurring with Western media in relation to the rest of the world. Rather than the consumption of Western products globally being an example of cultural exchange as those such as Phillippe Legrain (2003) believe it to be, citing that “America is an outlier, not a global leader,” it is using culture as a social system of power (p.63).

Cultural imperialism also occurs when countries with global media power insert themselves into local and regional markets. As Tanner Mirrlees (2013) describes, U.S. based media companies have made the effort to infiltrate smaller markets in countries in Latin America, Africa and other non-Western regions. These media conglomerates will support, sell technology to these countries and train the individuals at media firms in a Western way to “exert economic and cultural influence within postcolonial states through their national media systems” (Mirrlees, 2013, p. 26). Despite what critics of cultural imperialism suggest, it is difficult to ignore these implications and what the West is willing to resort to in order to maintain the control they have. It has gone on for as long as media has been flowing freely through the global market and has cause the solidification of the idea that media flows from the West to the rest of the world.

The impact of this control discourages smaller regional markets from producing their own content in the fear of going up against a region that is home to the top five grossing media companies in the world. Colin Sparks (2007) found it “extremely difficult for local producers to produce competitive material and thus effectively locked developing countries in to dependency

upon a supply of programming from the developed world every bit as securely as would direct economic or political control of their broadcasting institutions” (p.89). Then since these media exports from the West contain certain ideologies that the West believes to be true, those are the ideologies that become exchanged globally and consumed, rather than being a mutual flow of cultures or ideas.

In its own market, Western made media products are what are consumed at a higher rate. Although in the United States and United Kingdom you have diverse demographics and cultural centers, the mainstream media within those countries are still Western and in the English language – the dominant language in those regions. Based on this homogenous region and its domination both globally and domestically, a smaller market from a non-Western country is typically thought to make not make the same kind of impact and especially not in Western countries.

### *Ideology*

Covering the background of ideology which informs much of Western media and determines what is popular or acceptable in the markets of the United States and United Kingdom is vital in the research project. Formulating what ideologies are and what they mean needs to be discussed as it will be touched on later regarding how K-pop does not fit into Western ideology that is constructed through media.

Ideology “can refer to a systematic body of ideas articulated by a particular group of people,” this can be in reference to those in power or a political group (Storey, 2018, p.2). To Karl Marx, ideology is “false consciousness,” where the average worker in the capitalistic system does as they are told and follow the ideologies set in place, unaware that they are being oppressed by the elite. Another concept of ideology that is more widely used today and popularized in the late 1980s comes from cultural theorist Stuart Hall. At a very general level, Hall (1986) explains ideology to be “the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” (p.29). Hall illustrates ideology best through his use of the word “different,” as ideology is not a single set of beliefs or ideas that everyone holds to be true. Instead, ideology varies from person to person, often times being defined or constructed through one’s personal experiences,

race, class, religion and various other social factors. However, this being said there is a “dominant” ideology that becomes what is showcased through mainstream media and elected officials.

This is touched on through Hall’s (1973) encoding/decoding model of television which states that there are different positions the audience member can take when watching a piece of media. One can either fully accept the message that has been encoded by the makers, have a negotiated stance where they accept and reject the message or finally have an oppositional position in which they completely reject the message being sent to them. When the audience member does this it is known as decoding, and the various factors of what has informed their ideologies dictates what position they take when they undergo the decoding of the message.

Typically, the dominant ideology in a country is usually found in media that is considered to be “popular culture” or what is liked widely by most individuals and promoted by the mainstream media. For example, in the United States the dominant ideology is white, heterosexual, Protestant values that signify “normality,” and anything else is characterized as “other.” Despite the country’s diverse demographic, it still enforces this kind of ideology through its mainstream media, especially the news, “the overwhelming whiteness of the media strongly but silently conditions how Americans understand their own country and the rest of the world” (French, 2016, para. 13).

If anything besides the dominant culture is presented it still is presented in a way that fits the hegemony’s standards to be shown in a secure, non-threatening way. Therefore, since the United States and the West export the majority of the media, globally these are the kinds of ideologies that are being culturally “exchanged.”

### *Boyband Hysteria*

Contextualizing the “boyband” may not seem important for this research project, but it is another vital identifier of the surprising popularity of K-pop in Western countries. This shock originates from the history of the boyband and what traditionally a “popular” boyband has looked like in contrast to the Korean boybands that are achieving success in the West.

A boyband is often defined as a group of young men – usually in their teens or early twenties – who at perform vocally. Another important signifier that is unique to the boyband is who they are marketed to and who they are targeting. This is often young women and teenage

girls who often result in being the subject of most of their songs that they perform. As well as that, it is typically thought that the boyband does not play instruments in their performance and have manufactured, choreographed dance numbers.

The origin of the boyband is thought of to come from the West as it first was associated with barbershop quartets and many of the early vocal groups that were associated with Motown Records such as The Temptations. However, it is The Beatles that many journalists find to be the first true “boyband,” although they are generally classified as a rock band with a diverse fanbase. Despite their instrument playing, in their very early years many believed them to be a boyband due to the hysteria the group caused amongst female fans, feminist scholar Betty Ehrenreich (1992) characterizing it as “a dramatic uprising of women’s sexual revolution (p.85). The Beatles also introduced the idea of “choosing your favorite member” and each member having a distinct marketable personality that is now a solidified part of boyband fandom. In a sense, the Liverpool based group “provided the opportunity for women to break free from expected gender norms” and were comfortable enough in the space of their Beatles fandom to outwardly express their desires and sexualities (Cura, 2009, p.104).

This same kind of momentum associated with the Beatles has continued to make itself present in boyband fandoms over time. In the 1990s and early 2000s, boybands had a structured and manufactured appearance to them – groups such as the Backstreet Boys, NSYNC and Westlife specifically catered to the female fan. In the mid-2000s there was a transition where many fans began to turn to groups such as Blink-182 and My Chemical Romance inciting a shift into less of a “pop” style of music that prioritizes the ballad. However, that came to an end in 2010 when Simon Cowell revitalized the boyband revolution with his group One Direction.

Although only a total of 6 years together, One Direction managed to become the boyband with the sixth highest amount of sales compared to other groups who have been together for a longer amount of time. In their time together, the group toured globally including two stadium tours in the United States, their *Where We Are Tour* being the highest-grossing tour by a vocal group in history (Allen, 2014). One Direction introduced the boyband to a new generation of female fans and revitalized the same kind of “sexual revolution” that had made itself known with the Beatles fanbase. When the group made the decision to go on a hiatus at the end of 2015 after releasing their fifth studio album, many fans were left at odds. “Many One Direction fans have been left heartbroken, with one writing on Twitter: “I’m crying, help, one direction can’t be

splitting up, please lord.” (Britton, 2015, para. 6). Post One Direction the next closest example of a boyband that received global attention was Australian group 5 Seconds of Summer who opened up for the British boyband on two of their world tours.

In 2016, Forbes reported the top-earning boybands of the century by collectively looking at how much multiple groups made within a year. Many of the groups on the list earned at least \$40 million or more in a given year (O’Malley-Greenburg, 2016). This number shows just how profitable boybands are and despite the criticism of their mostly teenage fanbase, it is a structured formula that producers and media companies know will be successful. Of course, it is not a for sure given as there are groups that have not achieved One Direction level success – such as Simon Cowell’s current boyband project PRETTYMUCH which has not even made a fraction of One Direction’s earnings.

It was natural that the boyband would reemerge again after One Direction, but it was unclear what or who would be able to take their place. An important factor of all of these boybands and groups mentioned is their Western origins. Globally, the top ten boybands have all been from Western countries with songs in English and featuring mostly white men. While within groups such as One Direction and 5 Seconds of Summer there are members, who are people of color – Zayn Malik of Pakistan descent and Calum Hood of Maori descent respectively – it does not change that these are Western groups. They are boybands from primarily Caucasian-Western countries and are marketed within those guidelines. An international boyband from a non-Western region was not thought of to be the next mainstream hit in the West. Especially not one from Asia.

### *Asian Men and their Representation in Western Media*

In the Western context, there has been an anti-Asian ideology. Perhaps it is not outwardly anti-Asian, but ideologies in the United States and United Kingdom have caused a displacement of Asian individuals in mainstream media and popular culture. Usually if Asians are depicted in media in these regions, they are characterized in harmful stereotypes that group all with Asian descent to be one thing. The representation of Asian and specifically Asian men is another important piece of context to introduce into this discussion as it shapes a better understanding of up until recently what was considered the “norm” for how Asian men should be treated in media of the West.

Furthermore, with the way Asians have previously been represented in Western media as a form of “other” to emphasize the fact that the race does not fit within dominant ideologies and in theory K-pop should not have become successful. The Western stereotypes regarding Asians have a historical past that is rooted in the West’s fear of the rising East and the region’s power. This threat that was believed to be pressing then led to the creation of racialized immigration laws, hinderances and harmful tropes to “lessen” the race. As L.S. Kim (2004) best describes, the way that racial groups are represented in the media – narrative or news – often shift during “societal change” (p.129). This applies to the representation of Asians and the various modes the race has gone through in how individuals in Western countries view them and characterize them.

In the beginning Asians were displayed exclusively as “foreigners” or “exotic” and as a narrative tool for comedic effect or for white audiences to identify themselves in contrast to Asian characters. This is best displayed in early Hollywood films such as *Broken Blossoms* where the Asian male character is viewed as “a symbolic foil to complain about the abusive, immature authority of lower-class white men” (Tchen, 1991, p.133). The audience is positioned to see that white actor in yellow face is an even worse choice for the white female protagonist than the abusive, poor and alcoholic white male protagonist. “This representation of Yellow Man’s otherness, primitivity, and asexuality (despite his longing for a white woman), renders him an indisputable threat to masculinity, if not a threat of impurity in the Anglo-Saxon genetic stock” (Ono & Pham, 2010, p.33). Director, D.W. Griffith knew that these ideas would already be embedded into the audience’s mind that he would not explicitly have to say these ideas regarding Asian men, but instead the viewers would come to the conclusion on their own.

While Western media has progressed from this in the representation of those of Asian descent, it is still done in a way that characterizes anything or anyone from the East as less than the West and what the West has to offer. Asian visibility in a majority of media from the United States and United Kingdom is still a contrast to Western product to identify them as “other.” Asian men have continually been framed as feminine and desexualized, unable to play a romantic lead or the hero archetype. Instead they are often placed within media to represent a contrast to white male characters in an effort to emphasize their masculinity. “The Asian-American men are not portrayed in sexual terms and are imputed with no sexual drive. They are characterized as brainy wimps, martial arts contenders, perpetual foreigners, or fatalistic, silent victims” (Chua & Fujino, 1999, p.395). This contrast to the Asian female who has long been



fetishized by the West and white men, illustrates the ideology that Asian men have no romantic desires or chances even with women within their own race.

To Western media, Asian men do not have a place in the forefront of media, instead they should be positioned as background characters while exclusively what is “thought” to be Western – white, straight men – is shown. Andrew Kung (2020), a Chinese American photographer based in New York described in his piece for CNN what the various micro-aggressions and lack of visibility in media had done for his own upbringing and psyche as an Asian American male in the U.S. “There is often an underlying pressure to portray traditional visual cues of masculinity: chiseled jaw lines, elevated cheek bones, sculpted bodies” (Kung, 2020, para 14). Constantly, the Asian male in the white Western space is faced with the anxiety of proving themselves as “worthy” and to conform to what those spaces expect of them to fit their ideologies.

We can see these representations also bleed into how Western women view Asian men through a media program such as the reality dating show – *The Bachelorette*. The goal of the program is for a bachelorette to choose one man among multiple possible male suitors to become engaged to. Since its start in 2003 the show has lacked diversity in comparison to the overwhelmingly white male contestants, with Asian men being the least represented. Even when appearing on the program – although at a small rate – they do not make it past the second round of eliminations. Andy Chang, a Chinese American appeared on the second season of *The Bachelorette*, but was soon voted off within the first week. In conversation with the *Chicago Tribune* (2004), Chang discussed his conception that his identity as an Asian male is what sent him home so soon, “after the fact, I think [my ethnicity] worked against me” (Pierson, para.9). *The Bachelorette* is a Western program that is showcasing their ideologies and views of what a romantic or sexual relationship is supposed to look like. In this case, it is certainly not supposed to include the Asian male, whether Western born or not.

These kinds of representation and ideals of Asian men continually being surpassed and devalued as “real” men in Western culture has shaped the ideologies of Western audiences. On online dating apps, data such as that from OkCupid has shown that Asian men were least likely to be chosen and matched with woman than any other race on the platform (Brown, 2018, para.10). “Dating experts, have pointed to such stereotypes and lack of multiracial representation

in the media as part of the likely reason that plenty of online daters have had discouraging experiences based on their race” (Brown, 2018, para.19).

If Asian men have been signified in Western society through media as there to serve white protagonists, feminine, emasculated and undesirable, then why and how has K-pop become so popular in the mainstream? Especially with young females?

### *A Brief Introduction to K-pop*

Despite what some in Western countries who just discovered K-pop may think, it is not a new creation within the last five years or so. In fact, the Korean music market and their creation of boybands and girl groups have been thriving in South Korea and other smaller regional markets in East Asia since the 1990s. K-pop has even been present in Western countries since the early 2000s, with the girl group Wonder Girls even opening up for the American group the Jonas Brothers in 2009 on the U.S. leg of their world tour (Vincent, 2019, para.19). There has always been an intrigue with K-pop in the West, but it was more of a subculture that was enjoyed by a select and small demographic.

What exactly is K-pop? To begin, it stands for “Korean popular music,” which essentially can be characterized as similar to the popular music in the United States and United Kingdom, however in the Korean language. Kim Suk Young (2018) cites music critic Choe Ji-seon’s definition of K-pop as, “music dominated by idols’ dance music which strives to gain a competitive edge in the international market. In this respect, indie music or rock, or anything that does not belong to dominant idol music, usually is not characterized as K-pop” (p.8). Idols refer to those members in K-pop groups who fans “idolize” or look to with affection, love and monetary resources. While there are solo artists in the K-pop industry, it is the groups that find more success within the country as well as globally.

These groups are put together in a very manufactured and systematic way. Usually an individual who has the dream of being a part of the Korean entertainment industry will audition for entertainment companies and if successful, they will begin to train in those companies until they are put together in a group to “debut.” During the training, these idol hopefuls will take part in various lessons and assessments to better their performance to be skilled enough to be placed into a boyband or girl group. Not only are the technical aspects required to be a performer worked on by the trainee, but also the way they act and how they look, “another former trainee of

a large K-pop entertainment company, Edward Kang, recalls extensive camera training session where advanced trainees who were close to debut were expected to work on their facial expressions” (Kim, 2018, p.10). The personal freedoms are also limited for the K-pop trainee such as dating restrictions, the privacy to one’s own body, former trainee Korean Brit Euodias described how her past company would announce one’s weight publicly and ridicule the trainees’ facial features and body (Chong, 2020, para 43). The amount of time one is a trainee is also not determined, for example G-Dragon of BIGBANG trained 11 years before debuting while Ryeowook of the group Super Junior debuted after two months of training. Typically, there are at least five members within a group and each member is given a specific role such as “lead dancer,” “main vocalist,” “rapper,” etc.

Aside from the fact that the formulation of these groups is very manufactured and the overall control the company has on these idols or members is very strict, this is also replicated in the actual technicality of the music, performance and stylization of the group. Many K-pop songs, follow a certain structure as is illustrated by the “K-Pop” (2018) episode of the Netflix original documentary series *Explained*. The songs often feature lyrics in the English language – usually during the chorus – to make it more marketable or successful globally, and mix and match various genres. The Netflix documentary provides an example of Girls’ Generation’s 2009 song, “I Got A Boy” where within the piece there are at least nine moments where different genres work together such as Hip-Hop and Electronic Dance Music (K-Pop, 2018, 13:37). This structure can be found in many K-pop tracks that have been released even within these last 5 years.

The genre positions itself to continually intertwine certain “Western” aspects and trends that are uniquely from its competitor to blend together a hybrid genre that still remains true to its country of origin. Many of the songwriters of K-pop even originating from the United States and Sweden, then later being translated into Korean by the specific entertainment company that purchases the rights (K-Pop, 2018, 11:53). Therefore, the genre itself attempts to be transnational to cross over into as many regional markets as it can, but it wasn’t until 2012 when K-pop reached mainstream success in the West with the song “Gangnam Style” by Psy. Within four months of its release, “Gangnam Style” surpassed Justin Bieber’s “Baby” music video to become the number one viewed video on YouTube (Jin, 2016, p. 126). Soon after this success, the thought of K-pop in the West settled down, continuing to quietly work as a subculture among a

small group of fans. However, in 2017 that subculture emerged into the spotlight when the little-known K-pop boyband BTS won an award at the Billboard Music Awards shocking much of Western media. Since then the group has number one albums not only in South Korea, but also the United States, reached 28.2 million followers on Twitter and made YouTube history by accumulating over 100 million views in the first 24 hours of posting their music video for their song “Dynamite” – a track entirely in English (Herman, 2020). Their mainstream success has led to other groups setting their eyes on the Western market and effectively led to the inciting incident of this research paper.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This section presents theoretical concepts that are important to the study and critiques them or considers them in regards to this research. As well as that, this chapter looks at what work has been done in the same realm of this project and reviews them to provide an understanding of the landscape in which this research project situates itself.

### Popular Culture

Perhaps one of the most vital concepts in this project is understanding the notion of popular culture as it is what this study ultimately begins and ends with. It is K-pop's emergence into becoming the mainstream or apart of popular culture in the Western market that has incited interest and made it a prominent focus that requires to be studied.

John Storey has been a great advocate for understanding what it is that popular culture actually entails. The 7<sup>th</sup> edition of Storey's (2018) book, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* lays out a great framework for understanding how the concept of popular culture has come about and how different theorists have found it to be slightly different in various contexts. One is typically able to identify what it means for a thing, idea, concept or medium to be considered "popular." However, the latter term of popular culture, i.e. "culture" is more complicated and not as widely understood. Let us consider Raymond Williams' (1983) various definitions of what "culture" is. Firstly, culture can be understood as "a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development" (Storey, 2018, p.1). This definition essentially refers to artists, philosophers and poets. The second understanding of culture suggests customs or a way of life – this can include a group of people or a certain period in time (Storey, 2018, p.3).

The last definition of culture is concerned with works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity. This context it means the texts and practices whose principle function is to signify to produce or to be the occasion for the production of meaning. Williams' first offering of the meaning of culture isn't applicable for the context of this study and does not situate itself well in the full context of "popular culture." The last two definitions of culture are more relevant in the case of popular culture and perhaps we can even consider both of them to work when discussing K-pop specifically. In this case we have a regional market that has become popular globally with its export of media or works of artistic activity, but as well as that,

Korean culture – the customs and ways of life – are intertwined with K-pop and has also become popular, with many fans consuming the language and customs.

Popular culture has not always received the highest praise when it comes to past studies on the topic or those who prefer “high culture.” As it has been regarded as a lowly kind of art or culture that should not receive intellectual praise or acknowledgement. To Williams (1983) it is “work deliberately setting out to win favor with the people,” and something that is meant for the working masses (p. 237). What is considered to be well liked by the working class is often defined to be mass produced commercial culture, lacking the properties that individually created high art inhibits. This framework and mindset regarding popular culture would also fit into Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1997) theorizations on the cultural industry. Essentially, that the entertainment one consumes is manufactured and produced to be repetitive, lacking any kind of individuality. Many believe what is “popular” in media culture is inherently that since it is thought to be exclusively for the mainstream as opposed to intellectuals with “taste.”

However, there is much of what is traditionally considered to be “high culture” that is popular with the masses. Jane Austen novels and classic literature in general have been adapted into television series and films that are not exclusively liked by intellectuals who value this high culture, but it is also widely praised by the mainstream. Therefore, we cannot think about popular culture as simply a positive or negative thing in media, but we must see it as something that has value to be studied in the same way high culture is.

If the ideas surrounding popular culture exclusively followed that of Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) then we would not be discussing K-pop’s sudden popularity in the Western market. While I do believe that both scholars make valid points regarding media and how much of it is a cycle of production where creativity or alternative stories are lacking, that is not exclusive to popular media. In this case, we would never have seen K-pop come to the surface in Western countries, instead we should be seeing the same kind of musical artists or groups that adhere to what is a part of the dominant ideology in those countries. As Fiske (1989) mentions that ultimately it is the individual that makes popular culture, not the cultural industry which can clearly be seen by many Western’s fans taking to K-pop (p.24).

## Fan Culture and the Study of Fandom

While the various definitions of popular culture and its root meanings over the years have been very vital to the study of communication and media, we must dive even further into its association with fan culture. As previously mentioned, just because media is popular does not necessarily mean it should be seen less than as other art forms or diminish the value of being critically studied. Despite how large and vast the growth of modern fandom has been since the early 1990s, there has been minimal academics working in the field in comparison to other sectors of media studies. However, the work that has been done thus far has set the course to legitimizing the study of fandom as well as solidifying “the fan” and their actions as justified (Fiske, 1989; Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins, 2006; Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2017).

As Henry Jenkins illustrates in his influential work, *Textual Poachers* the word “fan” is an abbreviation of “fanatic” which has Latin origins. Deriving from “fanaticus” meaning “of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee” (Jenkins, 1992, p.12). This has of course developed greatly into what we typically know to be a “fan” today – an individual who takes a liking or interest in a particular thing. One can be a fan or “devotee” of anything from cinema to sports, the possibilities are endless especially in an age so over consumed by various forms of media. Although, the connotation of being a fan soon became negative or inaccurately represented by the media, positioning those apart of a fandom to be obsessive and antisocial beings.

The British network Channel 4 aired Daisy Asquith’s documentary *Crazy About One Direction* and received vast amounts of criticism based on how fans of British boyband One Direction were portrayed. Not only were these critiques coming from the boyband’s fandom on social media, but also from the actual fans – or “Directioners” as they are known – that were interviewed for the film. Becky, one of the participants in *Crazy About One Direction* felt as though she was grossly misrepresented in the documentary, “they made me out like... I don’t have no life, and that I just sit outside Harry’s [Styles, member of One Direction] house every weekend waiting for him to appear” (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2017, p.4). Many of times, the representation of a fandom is usually connected not with the activity of being a fan, but what specific thing they are a fan of and its place in society. Therefore, when someone hears of a One Direction fan or perhaps any fan of a male musical artist, the first thought for many is a delusional and desperate teen girl who lusts after who she is a fan of. These misrepresentations

have long been thrust forward by the media and has played a part in diminishing the act of fandom and its importance. However, the academics working in fan studies have done great work in legitimizing fandom and displacing negative assessments from critics.

Scholars such as Dell (1998), Harris (1998) and Thomas (2002), were great at describing what fandom is not and dispute the criticisms, but did little in understanding what someone gets from being a fan of something – their motivations to join and the pleasures they receive from it. It is my belief however that with these waves of fan studies, they had to follow a certain pattern to arrive at where we are today. First foundational work had to be set in making it known that fan culture was worthy of being studied and had a solidified place in further understanding popular culture and cultural theory. Henry Jenkins was able to use his own personal experiences as a fan to inform his work and engage with what fandom is as well as the site of where it occurs and the actions that take place there. With this he was able to suggest a counter to what many original theorists working in communications and media believed. Jenkins introduced participatory culture which suggests that fandom is inherently an active task where those fans engage with the media directly. Those who enjoy media enough to consider themselves fans are not passive consumers as what theorists such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Karl Marx believed when thinking about the relationship between audience member and media. The fan does not sit their passively consuming media or explicitly following what the dominant society is telling them to consume, but are using their own individuality and experiences to inform what they dedicate their time to.

Being a fan is anything but passive and it is important to emphasize what exactly “fan” is in contrast to a simple audience member. There are those who consume popular culture and media that fit in the structure of the passive spectator that the concepts of the cultural industry and false consciousness reference, but these are not the “fans” we are referencing here. Those in a fandom do not passively enjoy a specific media, but instead they often go out of their way to engage with it directly. The work performed by the individual sets them apart from the average audience member of a media text. As well as this, a major aspect of fandom versus a passive consumer is the aspect of community where the fan interacts with others, sharing their thoughts, feelings and emotions regarding anything ranging from the actual fandom to personal matters. This community structure and the practices that are synonymous with fandom are not what is often considered to be the dominant relationship between viewer and media text. Therefore, fandom is classified as a subculture.



Much of the work that has thus far been mentioned does not deal with studying fandom in the space of social media. Therefore, it is important to study newer research that has been done applying the original fandom framework to the digital space. A study conducted by Rhiannon Bury (2017) was great help in understanding fandom as a virtual community and some of the nuances that lie within fan culture on spaces that are occupied by various fan communities. In it she studies the relationship between social media platforms and how they impact or inform participation in fandom. While this does not directly relate with making use of studying fandom to answer a research question, I found her results interesting as they informed my decision of choosing Twitter as a social media platform to study. Bury found that out of the subjects she interviewed, many of them did not see Twitter as an engaging space for fandom due to how large the platform is. My own experience using Twitter as a fan, however made me question this final result as I personally felt as though once you find a community on Twitter it is either to stay within those confines.

Although the amount of literature regarding the studies of K-pop fandom online are limited and what has been done was conducted before BTS' mainstream success into the Western market, those that have been done consider Twitter as the given platform (Kim, Heo, Choi & Park, 2014; Lee, 2019; Ahn, Oh & Kim, 2013). The way Kim, Heo, Choi and Park (2014) make this justification of Twitter and K-pop is through the "multifaceted communication medium" that the social media platform is (p.2689). Essentially Twitter is used for various types of communities, those that are interpersonal, organizational or casual. As well as this duality the platform exhibits making an enticing social media space for all kinds of users, Zhao and Rosson (2009) found that even in Twitter's infancy, users found it accessible easy to use.

## Studies on K-pop Fandom

As touched upon, the interest in studying Western K-pop fans or K-pop in the Western market is relatively new as it has only been a couple years since BTS first piqued the interest of mainstream media. However, that does not mean that studies on K-pop fans in general is not available. Although I have a personal interest in K-pop, through various research of studying K-pop fans in various markets and during different eras of the Korean wave as it's known, I was better able to understand how to approach the study as both a researcher and fan. Atiqah Abd-

Ramin (2019) approaches his research on the social hierarchies within K-pop fandom in the same position, where they have familiarity with the subject as they have been a fan and understand the intricacies of the fandom. Ultimately that aspect helped them gain trust from the subjects he was observing through virtual ethnography and then later interviewing.

Through examining studies of K-pop's emergence in various markets around the globe, such as Latin America and Indonesia one can understand how naturally the genre of K-pop is inherently global. The cultural hybridization K-pop has mixes both aspects that are traditionally West and traditionally East – a marketing tactic used by the Korean entertainment industry to specifically infiltrate other markets aside from its own. In markets such as Indonesia, K-pop has done extremely well as much of the mainstream media within the country comes from outside the nation's borders (Jung, 2011, para. 7). However, in considering the Western market and how homogenous it is in the content it consumes or what can be defined as popular culture, it causes us to consider K-pop's visibility in the region even more. The United States and the United Kingdom do not have the same history as the much smaller Indonesian market that has been consuming a majority of non-Indonesian products for the last two decades (Jung, 2011, para.7).

K-pop members and their presence on social media platforms create a tight knit relationship between themselves and the fan which can also justify K-pop's global aspect (Ahn, Oh & Kim, 2013; King-O'Riain, 2020). This is especially important for fans that do not live in South Korea as social media may be their only "access" into being a part of their favorite idol's life. Twitter as well as Korean video streaming platforms like V Live help K-pop groups reach fans quickly and directly versus it being done through a manager or publicist. "Through daily streaming of (sometimes) live content from Korea on a Korean developed app like V Live they say that they "feel emotionally closer" to their K-pop boyband idols than they do to Western artists, who appear to be "closer" geographically and culturally" (King-O'Riain, 2020, p. 2). Despite geographic location and a mediated, technological world where there is a loss of personal interaction with one another, the fan wants to make use of that technology they already consume to garner a connection with the group they idolize.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

This section introduces the methodology chosen for this research project as well as discusses the research design including the data collection and data analysis used for this study. First, I will describe the background of digital ethnography and the commonalities within the research method. Then in the next portion of the chapter I will discuss how I personally utilized digital ethnography for the research of this study and lastly, I will discuss any limitations or ethical issues within my research design.

### Digital Ethnography

Digital ethnography as a research method has been on the rise in the last decade or so as many researchers have moved into the curiosity of studying the online space. However, the more traditional version of the discipline – ethnography – has historical roots in anthropological studies. Often time, these studies would have the researcher study a culture or group in a foreign land in the hopes of breaking down and analyzing their culture. Alan Bryman (2012) engages with ethnography in his text on social research methods describing how the researcher typically studies these cultures for lengthy periods of time and “watches and listens to what people say and do, engages people in conversations to probe specific issues of interest, take copious field notes, and returns home to write up the fruits of his or her labours” (p.431). Ethnography can take both qualitative and quantitative routes in the methodology based on what the researcher is attempting to accomplish, however rather than presenting a number or statistic, the ethnographer makes meaning of patterns such as social interaction, language, etc.

Ethnography is based and carried out to understand the “everyday” of those in their natural setting (Riemer, 2012). The typical types of data collection associated with ethnography include observation of participant, surveys, interviews and analyzation of artifacts to name a few. The researcher then uses these resources and pieces of data to find commonalities or patterns of a specific culture to understand a cultural group’s way of life (Varis, 2016, p. 58). In moving ethnography to the digital space and applying it to the internet, the only major difference is the aspect that the researcher is not in a physical place with the culture they are studying. Instead, they are at a distance with that culture and observing, interacting and collecting information regarding their community through means of a computer. Digital ethnography was the best

method for this research project as being in a fandom does not have one physical location – fans are located all over the world and there is not one area they are to be confined to that solidifies them more of a fan than another individual. Fandoms have consistently existed online and social media platforms provided them with more of a space to perform their duties as fans.

The nuances of digital ethnography are not as strict or structured as other methodologies are. There have been many different interpretations and approaches to the research method through some researchers studying online cultures and using content analysis to make meaning of what they have observed or interviewing participants. Researchers have even furthered their ethnographic studies to include the participant on online versus offline, studying them in the digital but also in the traditional sense (Hine, 2008). However, since then, communities on social media sites which are considered to be “public spaces” with Twitter being one of the most used platforms for academic research.

## Research Design

The concept of “K-pop fandom” has been used very broadly in this research paper thus far as it is meant to characterize the larger community online who listens to K-pop in all of its many facets and different groups. However, with the vast number of K-pop groups that have their own fandoms and communities online, it was important for the research of this paper to specify which fans of which specific K-pop groups would be studied and observed. I will be looking at the fans who interact within the fandoms associated with the male K-pop groups known as “BTS” and “GOT7.”

BTS was chosen due to much of mainstream media citing them as what kicked off K-pop’s popularity in the West. Debuting in 2013, BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan) found itself in the Korean music industry from a small entertainment company that had no previous successful groups to give it notoriety. In the Korean market BTS was not viewed as a success, but the group prided itself on prioritizing their fans and working on songs that discuss mental health, relationships and social issues. BTS over time developed a very strong international fanbase, one that worked hard to translate the group’s content and promote them, their work soon coming out successful as they catapulted the boys into the eyes of Western media. The strong social media presence of fans earned BTS a nomination for “Top Social Artist” at the 2017 Billboard Music Awards in Los Angeles, California. “When BTS finally showed up, the sound of screaming

shook the entire venue. In this moment, all eyes – of puzzled attendees and US media – fixated on the septet” (Lee, 2019, p.36). Their loyal fans used Twitter to vote for them collectively more than 300 million times resulting in their win. From this point on, Western media had their eyes on BTS and the group has continued to have great success since then.

On the other hand, GOT7 has also maintained success in the Western market, becoming the first Korean group to perform at the Barclays Center in New York and appear on the Today show in the United States (Herman, 2018, para. 2). As well as this, GOT7 not only contains members that are Korean, but have three international members that hail from Hong Kong, Thailand and the United States respectively. This aspect of having a multi-national group that is fluent in four languages – Korean, Mandarin, Thai and English – may also be a factor in being more accessible to the global market. Having a member from the United States – Mark Tuan of Taiwanese descent – may also contribute to reasons of having a Western audience. This is in contrast to BTS whose seven members all hail from Korea.

For the main field sites for my virtual ethnography work, I selected a social media platform that I believed would be best suited for studying K-pop fans. That platform is Twitter, where K-pop fans are known to interact and “perform” the duties required of their fandom. Through Twitter’s statistics for 2019 we are able to see the use of #KpopTwitter was used 6.1 billion times within the given year, showcasing that the fandom is very much present on the site and active (Adobo Magazine, 2020, para.1). My own personal experiences on the site as a K-pop fan also informed the decision to specifically focus on Twitter rather than Facebook, YouTube, Instagram or any others. As well as this, it’s important that the platforms used are Western based to increase the availability of access to more Western fans, although both platforms have a strong international base as well.

As mentioned, within the application of digital ethnography, it is often used along with different research methods such as interviewing or content analysis. Specifically, for this project I also enlisted a format of content analysis that I felt fit best to gain a better understanding and picture of the K-pop fandoms and their feelings regarding K-pop.

### *Sampling*

In looking at the fandoms associated with BTS and GOT7 on Twitter, I am concerned with Western fans of these groups specifically. The population of this study were BTS and

GOT7 fans from Western countries who operate online primarily in the English language. This study worked on the assumption that a majority of the information observed and collected the social media platform were obtained from Western fans due the use of English and based on the context of the given tweet. As well as this, if there were any posts used or specifically showcased in this study to analyze, the profile the content originated from verified the location of the user when permission to use their content was requested.

It was always my intention to collect tweets that I felt would be useful for this project. This version of sampling could be considered as purposive sampling as I was specifically studying the tweets from fans who seemed to be discussing topics that were close to the scope of this study. “What links the various kinds of purposive sampling approach is that the sampling is conducted with reference to the goals of the research, so that units of analysis are selected in terms of criteria that will allow the research question to be answered” (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). Although this is may not traditionally be associated with digital ethnography, I felt as though it would be the best way to narrow the vast amount of content and media on the site. The tweets, however, were selected after looking through the top 200-300 tweets with the most engagement from the end of each week of my chosen timeframe that featured the keyword “BTS” or “GOT7.” These were then ultimately and purposefully collected to analyze and look for reoccurring patterns based on the topic of research.

### *Data Collection*

The data was collected between March 16<sup>th</sup> and May 17<sup>th</sup> 2020. This can be considered to be a rather short period of time for digital ethnography, but there have been two external factors that have impacted this timeframe. Firstly, it is due to my own personal experience with the K-pop fandom as it is something, I have been a part of for the last four years and have a great understanding of already as an insider. Just as Atiqah Abd-Rahim (2019) describes, the position made it possible for him “to develop and refine a better understanding of the meaning-making practices of online fan communities” (p. 69). The second factor that contributed to this time frame is due to the overwhelming amount of content during these months that are due to the worldwide lockdown caused by the 2020 novel coronavirus. Twitter’s daily active users during the first quarter of the year grew 24% in comparison to the year before as reported by *Variety* (Spangler, 2020, para. 1). CFO Ned Segal was quoted as specifically tying it to the coronavirus

epidemic, “a strong start to the quarter that was impacted by widespread economic disruption related to COVID-19 in March” (Spangler, 2020, para. 2). Therefore, as a researcher I felt with the higher rate of tweets than normal during this time frame, an adequate number of tweets and posts were studied and collected.

To begin, I observed tweets from BTS and GOT7 fans in real time during the selected time period of this research project and made notes on initial observations. The tweets observed during this time came from my own timeline and individuals I follow who were randomly selected with no specific criteria in mind, except for their country of origin either being the United States, United Kingdom or Canada. During this time notes were made based on what the individuals on my timeline were discussing, how they interacted with another on the platform and what topics they continually brought up (as shown in Figure 1). After the end of the three months, I went back week by week and collected the top tweets associated with the name of the group that called attention to the specific notes I had written during my initial “lurking” or observations of those on my timeline. To do this I used Twitter’s advanced search option to narrow the search results to my given time frame and using the specific keywords of “GOT7” and “BTS.” After this I manually inserted the tweets into an Excel spreadsheet, logging the username of where the post originated, the date it was published and lastly the actual text of the tweet. Overall after eliminating tweets that did not fit my population, I came to the final total of 100 tweets from the GOT7’s Ahgases and 101 tweets from BTS’ Army.

<u>Field Notes</u>	
<u>Week 1 March 16<sup>th</sup> - March 22</u>	
<u>Got 7</u>	<u>BTS</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* choreo performance important to the fan</li> <li>* in jaebom livestream [hair]</li> <li>* voting on music shows vital "prove your fandom"</li> <li>* Kyum → US v them</li> <li>* common language: OMG... SOBBING... memes</li> <li>overall: desperation for atten.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* comparing BTS to... literally everyone.</li> <li>* Fan cameras as responses on every tweet... content doesn't matter / user doesn't matter</li> <li>* many edits from Suga's BDay last week.</li> <li>* Describing boys as "entire"</li> </ul>
<u>Week 2 March 23<sup>rd</sup> - March 29</u>	
<u>Got 7</u>	<u>BTS</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Jackson Wang Birthday</li> <li>- fans relish in what they like about him, the group.</li> <li>- emphasize on how hard work he is.</li> <li>fans value hardwork?</li> <li>the without kpop industry?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* lockdown initiating a lot of rewatching of old content.</li> <li>* possible code: plethora of the overload of kpop in general → content??</li> </ul>
<u>Week 3 March 30 - April 5</u>	
<u>Got 7</u>	<u>BTS</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Jaebom photoshoot</li> <li>* gender + masculinity</li> <li>long hair → fans discuss him</li> <li>"ending" toxic masculinity</li> <li>* upcoming comeback. Fans not satisfied overall w/ JYP (company)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* James Corden appearance.</li> <li>* Fans love James Corden/BTS interactions... Jimmy Kimmel not so much</li> <li>* why? Western validation but also don't want it?</li> <li>* Strange hybridity of wanting acceptance but also no.</li> </ul>

Figure 1: Field notes and thoughts taken down for the first three weeks of the project. These were based on initial observations on my own timeline.

Through the transferring the tweets to a spreadsheet, I was able to see all of the tweets I had gathered collectively. I then made use of content analysis by writing “codes” or more or less “themes” that I had written down and noticed in my initial ethnographic work of observing fans on my timeline. First, I read over all of the tweets once through without paying attention to all of the themes I had noticed over the three months and simply read them as just a fan rather than a researcher. I then went through the tweets again, however this time I made notes and coded which tweets fell under the specific themes and found that many of my initial thoughts did not



apply to the collected tweets. Then an adjustment was made to find better or reoccurring themes that fit the tweets collected, the end result were four themes that I felt were reoccurring throughout the gathered data (See Figure 2 and 3).

Username	Date	Tweet	Them V Us	Kpop's Style	Fan/Artist Relationship	Masculinity and Femininity	Assimilation	NA
defbabybird	24-Apr-20	Q. GOT7 are popular worldwide! What's the reason in your opinion? Crow	x					
NamjoonsFohawk	28-Apr-20	Yeah I knew GOT7. I was actually a BTS anti cuz I didn't like mainstream t	x					
Got7soulDef	15-May-20	Their music are unique. Not like any other mainstream songs. And Got7 ar		x				
jennifer1972	10-Apr-20	Yes! The U.S. made number 2. Let's go for number 1. I wish local mainstre	x					
scykque28	8-May-20	Woah that's where I first saw #GOT7 too!!! I developed a huge crush on J						x
ahgaxer	27-Apr-20	LOUDEERRR FOR PEOPLE IN THE BACK! Personally, I ain't one to stan for m	x					
nocucumberr_	27-Apr-20	I GOT SO EMOTIONAL READING THIS Sneezing faceLoudly crying face THA	x					
stryxahga	31-Mar-20	I like I love bts (ain't gonna comment ab bp) but like they're so mainstream	x					
jaebeomsworld	12-Apr-20	YES!! them as a group and as 7 individual people, they're just so different		x	x			
Puk_G7XOXO	30-Mar-20	Now or Never by GOT7 <a href="https://open.spotify.com/track/6oygMv193dCA3xO">https://open.spotify.com/track/6oygMv193dCA3xO</a>	x					
Love444324	5-May-20	Got7 X Western artist collab #kpopprediction #Prediction	x					
def_dimple	2-May-20	GOT7 stayed in top 4 on USA itunes for 4 days even with tight competitor	x					
dubudaldi	26-Apr-20	thanks to got7, it's been a while since i listened to western music omg	x					
foxiemark	12-Apr-20	why it's so weird that someone likes Now or Never? a western song? so w	x					
MadelynTran12	1-May-20	If JB and Jackson decided to collab. It's all over for us bitches. I dont really						x
AllIASKisYU	3-May-20	with zero western promotion and without a collaboration with any wester	x					
wjerap	2-Apr-20	If they do, I hope it's a good deal, like co-signing with a western label. Oth	x					
eunwoomohae	7-Apr-20	i keep thinking abt how jackson wang from got7 is a prime example of sor	x					
babyg4ys	20-Apr-20	Poison has this western vibe kind off and i love it!!!! And youngjae's high	x					
roroycmn	5-May-20	ldk abt the other group being "better" but with Got7 it is just real In my o		x	x			
younghodery	5-Apr-20	EH SMLJ IS THIS??? THE ANIMATED TRAILER??? GOT7 IN 1800s WESTERN	x				x	
lovelyjackjae	15-May-20	when are got7 gonna get to collab with a western artist	x					
ResiliaMe	3-May-20	And good songs should not be thrown away because of the concept or bec					x	
yodream_T	18-Apr-20	omg tbt again i dropped 5sos for got7 and my oomfs talked shit abt me R	x					
jbyien	7-May-20	Why is every groups/idsols signing with western agency but GOT7? CAN SC	x				x	
igototseven	20-Apr-20	it sounds so ,, like its a mix of western beats but is also so much like a kpo	x					
yogurtbeom	6-Apr-20	got7 hit my western side for their new concept Loudly crying face 🥺 a	x				x	
mememect	14-Apr-20	and very much accepted and loved by the western world. The fact that GO					x	
yeolmin20	14-May-20	In fact GOT7 is more well known around the world, members of four coun	x					
seojiaer	5-May-20	i still don't understand why got7 still isn't signed with an american label. t	x					
bunnypeach08	7-May-20	We all know JYPE's Marketing Division sucks on multi-tasking right? I gues	x					
LitDeSoulmate	2-May-20	I wish we continue to have high sales in the US so that JYPE will notice th	x					
got7maknaestan	29-Apr-20	Well GOT7 will just have world tour like usual without entering US market	x					
kaykaypop52	14-Apr-20	ts and black pink rule the US market, Got7 and Exo rule the European mar	x					
AlphabunnieW	2-Apr-20	I'm kinda new so I researched and not sure but didn't JYPE nearly go bankr	x					
shownu1994	16-May-20	I've always been drawn to JB! He's so talented and good-looking! There's						x
dyesievi	16-May-20	Imagine seeing GOT7 on the street, having fun and not knowing that they		x				

Figure 2: Example of Tweets collected and coded based on reoccurring themes for GOT7's Ahgase fanbase.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Username	Date	Tweet	Them V Us	Kpop's Style	Fan/Artist Relationship	Masculinity and Femininity	Assimilation	NA
fatimafarha_	11-May-20	I actually get so frustrated. On one hand there's the western music i x						
speakyourself99	7-May-20	Ever since I discovered @BTS_twt I struggle enjoying western musi x						
93DIOR	10-May-20	WHOS GONNA TELL ALL THE WESTERN ARTISTS STANS THAT BTS H x						
unoriginaldad	11-May-20	i entirely agree with the fact that bts get shitted on for nothing and j x						
AnnaNoe123	14-May-20	Something to remember: Taylor Swift is one of the only people that x						
Rkiaziz2	11-May-20	White artists : does the bare minimum Western media: omg this is x						
longlivebts	14-Apr-20	jimin and namjoon's vlive ended with 5.6M viewers damn all those v x						
JessKostel	11-Apr-20	It seems like a pointed microaggression (and more scathingly, xenop x						
cultmins	13-Apr-20	I think my favourite thing is when western stans start listing their fa x						
2kinassbichss	12-Apr-20	Some Tea to remind : -Bts never had a bad era all of their era's are i x		x				
solovmn	14-Apr-20	stop comparing bts, a non english poc group from an unknown comp x						
alapadma2	11-Apr-20	"Western observers still find it hard to accept that a small East Asia x						
TEARHOYAA	15-Apr-20	Let's be honest BTS literally have no competition whatsoever!!!! Th x						
fatimafarha_	8-Apr-20	the western music gatekeepers are mad they couldn't produce artist x						
seaslickbaby	7-Apr-20	why does bts always have to work thousand times harder than these x						
strayteezcf	16-Apr-20	BTS' global success was unintentional. Bh didn't plan to to break the x		x				
inneryoong	14-Apr-20	and bts are much more than a kpop group but what they aren't is a v x						
MicheBangtan	27-Mar-20	I said this years ago and it bears repeating: You can't compare BTS x						
grapeyoo	23-Mar-20	why are yall so bothered when kpop groups besides bts have ANY so x						
kiwijoon	17-Mar-20	After seeing the way the western industry has treated bts I can only x						
smlehoya	17-Mar-20	shutting bts out of western media and radio then copying their techn x						
omermeroz	28-Mar-20	it's not surprising it's redundant. One of the worst thing, as far as w x						
mes_bts	28-Apr-20	BTS got into the US market unexpectedly & when the moment was r x						
sweetbstea	8-Apr-20	IV. Skipped There was a lot of Beatles comparisons when BTS first x						
MyGalaxyBTSArmy	13-May-20	Kpoppies say BTS is forgetting their Korean roots and becoming too x						
MINPDNIM	16-Mar-20	us industry trying to forcefully recreate the army fanbase that grew x						
cutlyjohnny	16-Mar-20	no, big hit was aiming for western validation since day 1 since they v x						
jillyaaaann	16-Mar-20	will I ever get over my boyband phase? the answer is no. from back			x			
AnnadoresId	11-May-20	You can stan One Direction without hating BTS You can stan BTS wit x						
LOVEONROGUE	9-May-20	ONE DIRECTION AND BTS AND TWO DIFFERENT GROUPS WITH TOT x						
hoyasjoon	8-May-20	bts's success was not just a coincidence. bts consistently prepared f x						
CAM3RONPH11P	7-Apr-20	the disgusting fact is that if bts were white, there would be articles i x						
del_bangtan	3-Apr-20	US music industry absolutely hates that BTS blew up. Hates that the x						
_gaciria	4-Apr-20	"BTS is creating its own new mainstream" 🙄🙄🙄 x						
MyGalaxyBTSArmy	7-Apr-20	I expected this from some DJs but not @zachsang1 You can't tell P x						
voixdefleur	27-Mar-20	exactly. It's so demoralizing sometimes. Like, hello?! @BTS_twt ari x						
aegyoeobta	15-May-20	hilarious how the western media tries so hard to marginalize bts & j x						

Figure 3: Example of tweets collected and coded based on reoccurring themes for BTS' Army fanbase.

## Limitations and Ethical Issues

One of the major issues that can arise within digital ethnography is since the researcher is not physically present with the culture, they could make themselves unknown to the group they are studying if they so choose to. This could include “lurking” where the research simply observes by reading but not directly participating in the culture, however I believe that this observation is inherently apart of ethnography, but it is important in moving to the digital space that another method is employed that makes the user aware of use of their tweet. Markham (1998) enlists covert observation by reading participants responses, but then later uses interviewing to make herself known and rid herself of the ethical issues with anonymity.

The way I treated the first three months of this project ethically, the “lurking” period was the same way I would treat my normal activity on social media platforms. Rather than collecting specific tweets at that point unknowingly, I simply took notes on what I observed but did not collect anything explicitly yet. When I did collect tweets, I found it difficult to get into contact or receive a response from those who I messaged about using their tweet. This is not due to being

denied by the individual, but instead there would be no response at all which one could also consider to be a response in itself. However, I was able to receive responses from a majority and I made sure to let the individual know that I was making use of their tweet for this research project.

Limitations of this project were perhaps the time frame selected as it may have been too small as well as the number of tweets that were collected. In addition to this, I felt as though I was very limited in resources to contextualizing this study as many of the research that has been done within the realm of this specific topic was done after the research had already been carried out. Academics and scholars studying this generation and this emergence of K-pop is very new and still in their infancy. The lack of resources and access to libraries due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, I believe also caused this research project to be limited. While many sources were available online, there were a few texts that were inaccessible online and only available in physical libraries that had closed during the primary period for research.

However, overall, I conducted this project best to my ability due to the circumstances and limitations that the project faced.

## Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

This chapter discusses what findings and conclusions we are able to make in regards to the tweets collected in reference to the central and sub research question. The overall aim was to find why it is that K-pop was able to find Western popularity through the fans from that region. As well as this, I wanted to confirm and ponder if this could be considered a type of reverse cultural imperialism through the lens of the fans. This section first discusses common patterns that I noted in my work while going through the total of 200 tweets that I gathered over the three-month period. The next portion will then discuss how and what these patterns can tell us as to why Western K-pop fans have gone to K-pop despite past trends in the music industry following white, English speaking artists.

### Reoccurring Themes

#### *Them Versus Us*

One of the major patterns that emerged from the studying and analyzing of these tweets was the overwhelming apparent disassociation many of the fans had towards Western media. Although Western themselves, BTS' Armys outwardly expressed their dissatisfaction for Western Media and how BTS was represented. Despite BTS' popularity appearing on multiple Western talk shows such as *The Late Late Show with James Corden* and *Tonight with Jimmy Fallon* as well as Western award shows, the fans did not feel as though the group was taken seriously by the Western market. One user, @Rkniazi2 (2020) tweeted the hypocrisy she felt for the industry:

“White artists: does the bare minimum

Western media: omg this is an unprecedented talent and achievement

Poc artist: does the same and much better

Western media: do you hear something.”

Clearly, there is a divide on what fans believe regarding BTS in the Western market versus what statistics such as their sales and popularity in the United States in 2019 could tell us. “In April, BTS became only the third group in 50 years to have three number one albums on the Billboard 200 charts in less than 12 months, joining the ranks of The Beatles and The Monkees”

(Hollingsworth, 2019, para 7). There was a constant emphasis on BTS versus Western artists and how the group is more talented than any musician on the Western market. As well as that a great deal of Armys also seemed to reject any recognition from other K-pop groups, making it clear in their language. There is almost a rejection of Western validation, but at the same time in many of the tweets collected there was a need for it as well. In this specific tweet by user @fatimafarha (2020), she expresses her anger at the western market, but also calls them “gatekeepers.”

“the western music gatekeepers are mad they couldn’t produce artists the like of BTS who not only have a super dedicated & /intelligent/ fanbase but also make very meaningful music. & they’re annoyed they can’t control them, & that BTS are poc. It hurts their colonialist mindsets.”

This shows that while a majority of the fans have a “them versus us” mindset when it comes to the Western market, they still feel as though more could and should be done to promote their group to be taken seriously by the West. In a way the West still maintains its dominance by fans viewing it as a point of validation in the success of their group. However, they do not just want the validation of BTS through sales and statistics, but through accolades such as awards, radio play and respect as serious artists. Not “K-pop” artists, but strictly artists in general. The lack of this respect, many fans believed came from the “K” in K-pop, meaning the West’s history of lack of inclusion of diverse markets.

“the disgusting fact is that if bts were white, there would be articles about them every day, they would have performed at the grammys countless times, and they would not be constantly disrespected by the mainstream media, but here we are, they are 7 beautiful korean boys...” (Philip, 2020).

GOT7’s Ahgases also seemed unsatisfied with the group’s success on the Western market. Although sales and popularity wise the group does not quite match up to BTS, they still maintain Western visibility through various means. As touched on earlier, GOT7 became the first K-pop group to sell out Brooklyn’s Barclays Center in New York in 2018, when only a few years prior they had only been able to play a venue that contained 17,000 fewer seats (Herman, 2018, para. 2). While Armys believed that while BTS had Western recognition it was in a xenophobic way that only acknowledged the group when it benefitted the West’s media markets, GOT7 fans do not believe that the group is a part of the mainstream culture of the west.

“Why is every groups/idols signing with western agency but GOT7? CAN SOMEONE E X P L A I N” (lala, 2020).

For Ahgases there was more dissatisfaction with GOT7’s own place in the Korean market than in the Western market. If anything, many of those fans discussed the Western market in a positive light as if it was something to strive towards and value. Here there is a frustration with Ahgases’ wanting to have Western recognition, but they view the group’s entertainment company JYP as what is holding them back ultimately from mainstream Western success.

Through further analysis of these tweets, it was clear that despite the somewhat varied reactions between BTS and GOT7 fans regarding their selected group’s place in the Western market, they did not identify the groups as truly a part of those markets. Instead it seemed as though they believed that the groups were still characterized as “the other” by the West, but wanted their groups to be recognized as artists versus K-pop artists. This can be found in the way many BTS fans did not want individuals to compare the group with other Western boybands. For example, in a few tweets where both BTS and One Direction were mentioned, it was in a manner that characterized that an individual cannot compare the two despite both being boy bands.

“stop comparing bts, a non english poc group from an unknown company w no links who broke into the western market without aiming to due to nothing but their musical talent to four average white boys who had immense media support, links, constant radioplay n were manufactured” (solovmn, 2020).

For BTS fans primarily, it almost seems as though they do not want any connection to the Western market although K-pop in itself is a genre that mixes Western and Eastern aesthetics.

### *K-Pop Aesthetics*

When I first coded using my themes, I intended on including a separate category for “K-pop as Style” and “Fan/Artist Relationship,” however I soon noticed in my analysis and writing this study that they were very similar and blended into one another. Therefore, I decided to name this theme or pattern as the “K-pop Aesthetics,” which includes any tweets that dealt with the relationship between artist and fan, the production value and aesthetics of the genre.

The aesthetics of K-pop and the tweets that were considered to fall under this category were any time the fan discussed how much they love or felt connected to their chosen artist as well as how much they value the production quality of K-pop. This could include the individual

in question speaking about how their music has made them feel, etc. Such as user @yusaehan (2020) breaking down the individual qualities of her favorite GOT7 album:

“i feel like 7 for 7 is one of the best albums to really show got7's diversity when it comes to discography. there are very powerful songs like you are and face that emphasize on vocals, there's to me which shines light on their rap line, there's firework and remember you that.”

The vast contrast of K-pop to the West seems to largely be based on how magnified every aspect and characteristic of K-pop is compared to musicians from countries like the United States and United Kingdom. Fans seem to personally take the music worked on by the artist to heart and deeply identify with it than they would a Western song, another GOT7 fan stating that

“thanks to got7, it's been a while since i listened to western music omg” (bea, 2020).

Everything within the K-pop genre seems to take aspects of the Western music industry and heighten it even more for fans to be overexposed to the perfect genre they can always be a part of, always have content for and always conduct fan “duties” for.

The relationship between the artist and fan is another characteristic that many fans discussed on Twitter regarding what makes them enjoy K-pop and prefer it over other music. The relationship between the fan and the artist is very important nowadays indeed with the vast number of artists and content that is in the global market. The emergence of social media has been able to bridge the gap between fan and artist even more with artists both Western and non-Western making use of it to connect to their fans. This has also become a very important and intricate part of the music industry for marketing purposes, which K-pop has certainly utilized to connect with their fans. It was found that both BTS and GOT7 fans were enamored with how close they felt to the groups despite being thousands of miles apart.

the way that bts talk about their bond is not " we are such good friends" its " for some reason, we are unexpectedly perfect for each other although we are so different. Its like theres this invisible connection between us, like we were meant to be" and i find that beautiful” (dailykkyu, 2020).

This connection has also led to the fans discussing members in a way that suggests that they view them as a friend or someone they know personally. They then begin to associate the members as individuals with varying personalities, interests rather than a manufactured production created by a Korean entertainment company. That individuality is showcased through the various social media accounts of the groups and respected members. While this is something that is not

particularly unique to K-pop in regards to Western artists, in analyzing the fans tweets it's clear that it is conducted in a more authentic way.

### *Embracing Masculinity and Femininity.*

The reoccurring theme of masculinity and femininity also came up within the 200 tweets collected. As touched on previously, Asian males are typically associated with femininity in Western media and have been “signified” as such by the ideologies of the West. However, the Western fans in this data set do not try to defend their idols by saying that they are indeed masculine as Asian males, but instead embrace them as both masculine and feminine.

“Never forget this iconic

@bts\_twt

photoshoot wearing skirts, fishnets, and lace Fire

They said fvck gender norms and toxic masculinity” (taebokkiii, 2020).

The fans identified the aspect of what they and many believe “masculinity” to be as an ideologically Western concept. That the West’s version of masculinity is that of a toxic one that these Western K-pop fans do not identify or value as a concept. They are very self-aware of the differences that the media continues to place on K-pop artists based on these preconceived notions, beliefs and values that are presented in Western media.

“I wonder when this UNNIE will stop.. Jaebeom tries to take it in and say yes Unnie is here but soon it will get sexiest and annoying..Hope you all stop annoying his hairstyle like that after reading his open mind about feminity and masculinity” (Def\_friend, 2020).

The word “Unnie” in Korean takes on the meaning of older sister, which the fan is calling Im Jaebeom of GOT7 in reference to how he can be both feminine and masculine in presentation. The frustration of this fan is in playful way to display their surprise at how Jaebeom can take on both the identity of “unnie” – a pretty older sister – but also a sexy man. Western fans are not rejecting the Asian male as their media has attempted to condition them to, but instead they are using K-pop to identify what is toxic about preconceived masculinity.

### *Assimilation*

The last major theme that I was able to identify through the tweets analyzed was this focus on assimilation to the Western market. This area of discussion was brought up in two major ways, which included both the fear of assimilation and also the acceptance of it. In



comparing and contrasting the tweets that I found to having to deal with this topic, I found that the BTS and GOT7 fandom had different ideas regarding this issue of assimilation into the Western market. For BTS' Armys, this also is directly related to the previous topic of "them versus us," where fans do not believe BTS to be in the mainstream based on the way Western media places them in the context of the market. This continual rejection of the West and in their eyes the lack of respect that is given to BTS despite their global popularity leads us to infer that it is because their lack of assimilation. BTS does not fit in to the Western market, but seemingly that is what the fans like about the group – that they are not like typical Western content.

"fcuk US imperialism, thank god bts doesywant to release english songS" (pocketvmon, 2020).

The user's notion to use the word "imperialism" is even more striking of how the fans do not want the group to change and alter the culture associated and surrounding K-pop to become more respected in the Western space.

A majority of the GOT7 fans that brought up assimilating seemed to welcome Western influences and concepts as they believed it to perhaps help the group's image in Western markets. This could have to do with the fact that as mentioned, one of the members is from the United States, therefore fans seemed to accept incorporating Western music industry tactics more willingly despite GOT7 being a K-pop group.

"why it's so weird that someone likes Now or Never? a western song? so what? GOT7 is an international group with 3 foreigners, and one from the west. what's the problem?" (yeosa, 2020).

Furthermore, on their most recent mini album that was released during the time this research was conducted, fans seemingly welcomed the possibility of GOT7 introducing more Western styles of music into their songs as tweeted by user @babyg4ys (2020):

"Poison has this western vibe kind off and i love it!!!! And youngjae's high note give me goosebumps #GOT7\_NOTBYTHEMOON #GOT7."

Although perhaps this aspect of assimilation into the Western market could seem comparable or similar to the previous theme discussed of Western K-pop fans wanting to stay separate from the Western market, I believe it was necessary to differentiate the themes. This is due to the fact that in my analysis I noticed that the way fans discussed these two topics varied enough that they needed to be their own categories.

## Analysis

### *Rejection of the West*

Based on analysis and meaning making through the tweets that were collected I was able to narrow K-pop's success with Western fans down to an overarching theme that was found among both BTS and GOT7 fans collectively. This is the Western fan's infatuation and love of K-pop coming from the fact that they believe the genre is everything that the Western music industry and its artists aren't. What I mean by this is that through the results of what "themes" were touched upon the most in the tweets collect as well as the actual substance and context of these tweets, we can see that even the Western fan is skeptical of the Western industry. K-pop in itself is a hybrid genre that builds upon Western aesthetics such as the idea of the boyband, social media communication and production – but does it in a more magnified way. It re-appropriates these characteristics to make it culturally Korean, however it is different enough from Western music products that those Western fans who are rejecting Western ideologies and content consume it (Yoon, 2017). The fan recognizes the way it's similar to Western music and boybands of the past making it a regional market a Western fan can identify it, but the way that it is culturally different seems to be what makes them want to actually be a fan.

We can see through the reoccurring themes within the tweets and the few interviews that were conducted that most of these themes were in relation to the West or how the fan's respected K-pop group differs from the West. GOT7 fans specifically however seemed to speak about Western music in a more positive light and that may come from the fact that they have a member who originates from the United States, therefore the fans more accepting. However, many of the tweets collected still have the sentiment that the Western market is separate from K-pop despite what the genre's visibility in the United States. The content was always in contrast to the West as many researchers who have worked with K-pop fans in the West have found (Yoon, 2018).

If we think back to Hall (1973) and his encoding/decoding model of television and apply it to this case with Western K-pop fans, we can see that they are taking an oppositional stance. Rather than accepting the traditional media and content projected by the West and the mainstream media in that country, they rejected it and decided to find content elsewhere.

### *Reverse Cultural Imperialism*

What does this then mean for our earlier asked sub question regarding whether K-pop on the Western market and its popularity with Western fans could be considered reverse cultural imperialism? I would argue that while this is perhaps the most pressing case for reverse cultural imperialism, K-pop has not reached the full-fledged status in the Western market to be considered as such. In looking at both the analysis of the fan tweets and relevant literature, the Western market still dominates the Korean market in product and capital (Jin, 2007). When Dal Yong Jin wrote his piece on reverse cultural imperialism and the Korean market specifically it was in 2007 before the current era of K-pop we are speaking about. Although many things have changed since then and there has been great growth of South Korea on the global stage and in the West, there is still an imbalance and inequality (Jin, 2007, p. 767).

The idea of reverse cultural imperialism is also not applicable based on how we have seen fans react to the way that groups such as BTS are treated by the mainstream media in the West. Despite having growing popularity and acknowledgement from mainstream media outlets such as *Billboard* and *Rolling Stone*, the media still treats them as the “other” or exotic. It is my belief that this why the fans are so adamant about rejecting the Western media in relation to BTS and the Western market. They have identified the ideologies associated with the West such as that any product or individual from the East are to be classified as the other or in a non-threatening way to Western culture. For example, organizations such as MTV, the American Music Awards and *Billboard* have been supportive in the content they post regarding K-pop such as having specific correspondents for the genre as well as inviting groups to perform on their shows. However, all three in their award shows have made individualized categories for “K-pop,” not including the genre to be comparable with Western artists (Liu, 2019).

As well as that, the media has characterized K-pop as manufactured and inauthentic, however still seek to consume the culture as they know it is widely popular amongst fans online. Something that was touched upon in one of the tweets mentioned in this study was under the reoccurring theme of assimilation and how the fan did not want BTS to release an English song. This is something else that media has consistently asked K-pop groups in interviews as to when they would release a song entirely in English. K-pop does not originate from an English-speaking country, the language and look of the genre is specifically Korean, but the dominant culture in Western media seemingly wants to absorb it and make it more Western.

Regardless of the fear of assimilation that's on Western K-pop fans minds, in August 2020 BTS released their first entirely English song as a group (France, 2020). BTS being the most popular group on the Western market and making use of the English language for a full song could incite the discussion that perhaps this was a method of being even more marketable for Western media. In fact, only in March 2019, the leader of BTS – RM – was quoted in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* stating that they would never want to change their identity to achieve a number one. “Like if we sing suddenly in full English, and change all these other things, then that's not BTS” (Bruner, 2019, para. 2). The loss of Korean in their music was clearly on their minds regarding authenticity to who they are as individuals and as a group from the Korean industry. However, perhaps after analyzing how fans feel regarding BTS not being recognized in Western media or treated well, the group thought to put out a product that fits within Western media standards. As a male group from Asia they had to present themselves as “non-threatening” to truly be considered by the media – and that starts with assimilation.

“Dynamite,” BTS’ English language song has now become the most streamed video on YouTube and it's difficult to say whether that is due to the power of their fandom or this new found movement into being consumed by Western popular culture (France, 2020, para. 1). The movement of K-pop groups to do more English songs hinders it from being reverse cultural imperialism as the West is attempting to make it fit within Western social structures of power. A fallback on English will then rid K-pop of its cultural identity and diminish it as a Korean product in the Western market. Absorption of Western ideologies and ideals will then just cause them to turn into a Western product.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

This study has explored the emergence of K-pop as popular culture in the Western market through the lens of online fandom. Even while this research project was in the process of being executed, new studies of K-pop in Western markets continued to emerge. If anything, this shows just how important it is to study any kind of markets that emerge in a global system where media feels so one sided and one way flowing. Thus far this has been K-pop and it shows no sign of stopping anytime soon. Unlike the Western boybands of the past who have come and gone over time, the K-pop industry is constantly producing new groups and new content for Western fans to consume. They are overwhelmed with content and judging on what we have discussed in this project, they will continue to consume it.

To reiterate, our original aims and objectives were to identify using and studying fan culture online, why K-pop has emerged into the Western market. The “why” could only come from the fans as they are the ones that were able to formulate almost something resembling a grassroots campaign to bring K-pop into the fore front of Western media. The only way that a product such as K-pop could be recognized by the West was if their fan following in countries such as the United States, United Kingdom and Canada were large enough that caused them to pay attention. Coming from the East which has such a stereotyped connotation in the West, K-pop had to emerge through fans and social media.

Through studying and analyzing the tweets of these fans, we were able to find themes regarding what the fandom of BTS and GOT7 felt and discussed on Twitter. The themes that became reoccurring of the Western fan’s tweets, rejection of Western media and classifying it as biased and xenophobic, along with the overall aesthetic/hybridity of K-pop, the embracement of both masculinity and femininity and fear of assimilation gives us an overall picture of why fans enjoy K-pop. Through digital ethnography and content analysis, you often time have to make meaning and inferences through your data and observations. Based on meaning making and my own personal position as a K-pop fan, I felt that overall these themes lead to show the stark opposition the Western fan has for their own market. That this then causes us to believe that the rejection is because of how different K-pop is to Western media. The fans are seeking different and oppositional media from the cultural imperialistic West.

The main conclusion we can draw from this study is the supposed possibility that Western and English-speaking fans seem to reject their own market and no longer identify with it. This is even more interesting as K-pop itself is a hybrid genre that mixes both the West and East together. However, with young people being more socially and politically aware than they have been in recent years, I believe it is not too far-fetched to say that they are identifying what is wrong within their own cultures and media markets. “Ipsos Mori found that 42% of young people (aged 10-20) had participated in some kind of meaningful social action in the last year” (Esmeraldo, 2016, para. 8). This is what overall has caused them to find interest in other regional markets and K-pop more specifically.

Finally, in tackling whether or not K-pop is an example of reverse-cultural imperialism, we found that considering the power the West still has, it is very unlikely. There is always the possibility that it could become truly counter cultural imperialism, but until there is an equal two-way flow of media between the East and the West, we cannot label it as such. The Western market has seemingly “accepted” K-pop, but it does not seek to give up its throne of being the dominant culture, especially not within its own domestic markets. Therefore, it is attempting to merge K-pop into a more “Western-like” product, whatever means possible. We have seen this theme of assimilation being on many of the fans’ minds through their discussions of K-pop songs beginning to sound more Western or a push back for songs in English. Music companies in the United States are even enlisting and hiring K-pop marketing strategists to help with the promotion of Western artists (Knopper, 2020, para. 1). The Western market knows how successful K-pop is, but they seek to make use of it to benefit themselves economically and socially in an attempt to overtake K-pop by using their own methods.

If there is anything to take away from the research conducted here, it is that while K-pop is a very promising regional market that has led many to believe that there is a future of further cultural exchange and globalization, we need to remain skeptical as well. Through studying barely, a fraction of the actual tweets that are sent out everyday by K-pop fans we were able to understand and see their stresses regarding the Western market. While they do view it as a form of validation for their favorite groups, they do not want it at the cost of the Western market consuming it entirely until K-pop loses the “K.”

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