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K-pop & Hyper-Consumerism: A Colorful Chaos

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ABSTRACT

Min-Ji is a 19-year-old college-going student during the day and an ardent K-pop fan during the night, with a modest inclination towards the BTS. One of the strongest proofs of her craze for K-pop is her dorm room at the University. The room is covered with posters and photo frames of BTS members. More than University books and supplies, the shelves in her room are decked with BTS albums. More than her family photos, there are photos of J-Hope, a BTS member. She is an avid K-pop fan who purchases their merchandise wherever she goes. Her mission is to buy all products of BT21. BT21 are characters created by the BTS members that have made Min-Ji a fanatic for these products. Many Min-Jis are in the corners of the World 'consuming' their favorite K-pop band's products and flying across the World to watch their events. This craze makes a bystander wonder what it is about K-pop, the Korean popular music industry that creates such a massive fan following all over the globe! The present article explores the above.

Keywords: Hallyu, K-pop, Consumerism, BTS, Fandom, Culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Korean pop music, popularly known as K-pop, is a popular genre of music of the 21st century that originates from South Korea. It has positively and actively participated in the spread of the Hallyu wave across the globe. The Hallyu wave refers to the widespread popularity of South Korean entertainment all over the World, and it encompasses various modes of entertainment, including K-pop, K-drama, K-beauty, etc. K-pop made a significant contribution to the rapid rise of Hallyu, and credit can be given to bands like BTS, BLACKPINK, TWICE, EXO, etc, who achieved immense success not only at the national but even international platforms. They created an ardent fan following both in Korea and outside of Korea. Even though it is a phenomenon of the 21st century, it was there even in the 1990s; however, around that time, it was restricted only to Korea due to limited digital media technologies. The international success of K-pop is primarily due to the following factors: (i) the unique features of K-pop music, which consists of "exceptionally high-quality performance and extremely polished aesthetic," and (ii)

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the Korean government's support.

II. TRANSNATIONAL K-POP

K-pop started with a band called Seo Taiji and Boys, a huge sensation in South Korea in the late 80's. By the time the band dissolved, it had changed the trajectory of the musical industry, encouraging artists to be bold, innovative, and experimental. Although they were growing popular in South Korea, the most significant milestone was the 'Gangnam Style' launched in the year 2012, which completely changed the fate of K-pop as it became a global sensation with billions of views and reached the top of musical charts in various countries, including the United States. Thus, it paved a path for Korean music and entertainment to the outside World. However, the song is insufficient to keep the fan base growing. Two significant factors that contributed to the global rise of the Korean musical industry are highlighted below:

(A) K-pop music production

One of the main reasons behind the success of the Korean music industry is the audio-visual, which sets them apart from other mainstream bands all over the World. The producers have carefully used deliberate and well-planned strategies to make the audio-visuals more lucrative. The methods used to make compelling musical content are diverse audio-visual content, systematic and synchronized training of the singers for their performance, and core elements of choreography^[1]. The musical is characterized as colorful, with diverse musical styles encompassing genres from hip-hop to jazz. Secondly, most of these songs have lively and uplifting melodies that evoke mostly energetic and positive emotions.

Along with the uplifting melodies, the producers even include a plethora of electronic soundscapes, vocal harmonies, etc., building a rich experience. They are known for their creative dramatics and synchronized dance movements, making the musical more engaging and aesthetically pleasing. These synchronized movements are one of the most crucial features of K-pop. The choreography complements the music and the content of the music, making it more exciting and theatrically pleasing to the audience. In order to make it a worldwide phenomenon, the whole crew comes from different parts of the World, which makes it more entertaining for a more significant section of the consumer base. The artists are known to undergo a rigorous regime of dance lessons, singing, coaching, English language classes, etc. It is done to make the audio-visual content close to perfect with high-quality singing and dance moves. Thus, instead of being confined to one pattern, they have broadened their horizons, allowing them to attend to different tastes and music appeals.

(B) Korean government support

A unique actor in the growth and expansion of K-pop has been the South Korean government, which has actively supported and assisted in the growth of the musical industry. Over time, the government changed, but their intention to help the musical industry grow did not, although different governments had different contributions. Such as the Kim Dae-Jung government, which held office around the late 1990s, focussed primarily on budget allocation, providing infrastructure necessary for growth^[2]. The Lee Myung-Bak government, which held office in the early 2000s, focused on hosting various K-pop events, which helped nurture and provide a conducive environment for its propagation. The government invested heavily in the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, with particular attention to K-pop. It is said that almost 33% of their venture capital is spent on the development and growth of the entertainment industry.

Additionally, they even changed their laws and regulations. Prior to the 1990s, there was a Korean censorship law that prohibited artists from creating content on specific controversial topics. This censorship was later seen to be a hurdle. Thus, in the mid-1990s, the Korean constitutional court did away with the censorship law, which opened many opportunities for artists to explore^[3]. It allowed them to create content on bolder ideas and reach the consumer base, which was unattended in the past. In addition to the above initiatives, the government has been adamant about significantly improving infrastructure to ensure the country is at par, if not better, than most other countries. Lastly, the government has supported the musical industry by assisting them financially and in education. They have provided facilities like loan opportunities with low interest rates, subsidies to the K-pop agencies to help them establish themselves in the market or any other kind of financial assistance, lowering the burden on these production companies, and they can focus on creating high-standard content. Furthermore, they have promoted growth by protecting their Intellectual Property, making the artists and the production companies feel more secure about producing artistic work^[4].

Several other supporting factors have also contributed to the success of the Hallyu wave. However, their success can be primarily attributed to their openness to adapt to the changing society and markets the World over, persistent innovation, and a constant emphasis on keeping the audio-visual content creative and captivating^[6]. South Korea is a conservative country with a high degree of media censorship. It is a commendable effort, especially from the government, to take a massive step in parting ways with the traditional norms and permitting the incorporation of contemporary-controversial themes and adoption of sophisticated subtexts into their musicals. It played a vital role in spreading the music across Korea. Not to forget the meticulous work done by the production companies in ensuring high-quality content, working

with diverse crew members coming from different corners of the World, and regularly working towards achieving versatility in their content. Such meticulous work has resulted in appealing to a wide range of consumer base with varied musical tastes.

(C) K-pop outcomes

The success of the K-pop industry has brought about both positive and negative outcomes. One of the most significant positive outcomes has been the rise of the Korean economy. It has single-handedly assisted in pulling the country from the 1997 financial crisis and has continued to soften the impact of the 2008 crisis or even the pandemic. For fans, it has successfully promoted the growth and development of a vibrant fan community and opened opportunities for young talent to get into the music and dance industry^[8]. However, despite their roaring success and the plethora of positive impacts it has brought about on a larger scale, there have also been negative consequences. The most significant negative outcome has been the advent of hyper-consumerism. Hyper-consumerism refers to the relentless and excessive purchase of goods and services exceeding their reasonable usage. The Hallyu wave has not only expanded worldwide by spreading Korean dance and music but also fostered consumer culture marked by hyper-consumerism. The following section elaborates on how K-pop idols and the Korean music industry, in general, have impacted consumer behavior.

III. K-POP AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Philip Kotler, the most renowned Marketing scholar and consultant, developed a Stimulus Response Model called the Consumer Response Model^[7]. The model explains how a consumer behaves or responds to external marketing stimuli and its impact on purchasing decisions. The stimulus here refers to companies' advertising tactics, how they package the product, pricing, etc. It includes everything consumers hear, see, and experience about the product or service. Based on the stimuli, there is a specific range of responses: Cognitive response, Affective response, and Behavioural response. Cognitive response is when the consumer knows and understands the product. The affective response is to see how the consumer reacts to the product, followed by the behavioral response, whether the consumer buys the product. These responses act as a feedback mechanism to assess whether they are on the right track.

In Economics, there is a general law called diminishing marginal utility. According to the law, the utility derived from using it decreases by consuming every additional unit of the same product or service. In other words, as we consume the same products or services more, the satisfaction derived from it reduces. Based on the law of marginal utility, the K-pop industry would not have succeeded in promoting hyper-consumerism because the fans would not have

spent money on buying these products as they would not be deriving pleasure from using the product. Thus, it can be safe to assume that this is an instance of increasing marginal utility. Generally, there are three results of marginal utility after buying a product: (i) first, being a negative marginal utility, which is also called the law of diminishing marginal utility; (ii) second, being that there is zero marginal utility, meaning that no satisfaction is derived from the consumption of one additional unit of the product, and (iii) lastly, there is a positive marginal utility, where the pleasure or the satisfaction derived from the consumption increases with the increase in production. It also indicates that the purchase and consumption of the merchandise are not only about the price and satisfaction level. As the economy grows, the overall lifestyle of the population also improves. Thus, the decision to buy depends on factors other than the price and need for the product. Maslow, an American Psychologist, categorized various needs of humankind in his hierarchy of needs theory into five categories: (1) physiological, (2) safety, (3) love and belonging, (4) self-esteem, and (5) self-actualization. Hence, with improved lifestyles, consumers start delving beyond their physiological and safety needs.

K-pop idols feed into the minds of their fans by ensuring that they look attractive, radiate a magnetic and charming personality, and, of course, through their performances^[8], leading to a significant section of the population growing additional appeal for the singers, which results in the formation of the fan group, as it allows individuals to connect with fellow individuals psychologically – the famous ARMY fan group for the BTS band or InSomnia for a band called Dreamcatchers. The emotional and psychological appeal to the fans allows them to impact their purchasing decision. They constantly launch products for their fan groups, and when fans purchase this merchandise, they feel closer to the fan group members and even the band, as it is one of their ways to show loyalty and affection to their singers and bands^[8]. Given the present context, the emotional need created in the minds of consumers falls under the category of Maslow's need for love and belonging. Under the need for love and belonging, humans need to feel loved and included and have a sense of belonging to a specific community. People seek emotional connection from those around them; they want to be accepted, understood, and supported. By establishing a group, K-pop fans fulfill the social needs under this category. It provides a platform for thousands of fans to connect by sharing their mutual love for the band or any singer. Moreover, the fan group impacts consumption drastically. Majorly there are two kinds of impacts – personal level impact and the fan's role within the fan group such as that of a leader.

Three types of cultural values are at play that impact a fan's personal consumption level – other-oriented value, environment-oriented value, and self-oriented value^[5]. Other-oriented value is

when interactions with fellow fans drive consumption. The choice and decision to purchase is determined based on the general view of the fans in their respective groups about particular merchandise. Environment-driven value is at play if the fan group intends to purchase something in the majority. Often, individual consumption also depends on it when, in the fan group, people share supply sources of specific merchandise more than others. Lastly, self-oriented value is about a personal connection with the band or singers and how strongly one connects with them to buy limited edition merchandise. The second type of consumption depends on the fan's role. These are for fan leaders, who tend to buy mostly all the products, stay updated about their idols' news, and buy relatively more products than other fans to maintain their status quo.

In addition to the fan groups, another significant factor is the targeted audience. At face value, targeting the age group between 10 and 25 years is not a good idea because most are not earning. However, one of the reasons why K-pop targets this age group is to develop and strengthen brand loyalty early on as they have more time, fewer priorities, commitments, and responsibilities in general, giving them ample time to commit to these bands and fan groups. Although they do not possess a stable and consistent source of income, their parents can still buy for them. Furthermore, the fan following will last longer than others as they develop the bond since childhood and will have a different place in their mind. Mostly, the trendsetters and influencers also fall under this age group. By targeting them under the ripple effect, K-pop tends to reach a larger population and convince them to buy their merchandise. Lastly, this age group is neither mature nor cares about savings and investments. Instead, this age group concentrates on instant gratification, short-term gains, and fleeting happiness, thus making them the perfect consumer base to spend money on merchandise, fan club memberships, and concerts/events.

(A) The case of BTS

Considering the template of Kotler's Consumer Response Model^[7], in the case of K-pop, the stimulus is that the music industry spends heavily on marketing, which grabs the attention of fans worldwide, such as the case of BTS, managed by the HYBE Corporation. This agency regularly organizes world tours for BTS, allowing them to create a sense of community with the fans in different corners of the World. They ensure a strong presence on social media. Their web and social media pages have many behind-the-scenes clips to show how these singers are in real life. They even organize sessions where these singers interact with their fans. Not only do they have a firm grip over social media, but the agency has launched and established an official BTS fan club, which provides fans with exclusive information about the band, their merchandise and a chance to interact with the members. The agency has collaborated with

international bodies such as the UNICEF, with which, they launched the ‘Love Myself’ campaign to help prevent violence against children and teenagers worldwide. The agency has successfully worked towards showing that the band is beyond singing and performance. Such activities show what the band believes in and how much it respects and values its fans, strengthening the bonding and loyalty towards the band. The cognitive response states that consumers learn about the product through extensive, meticulous promotion and advertising. By constantly launching world tours, creating fan clubs, and creating online platforms to interact with BTS members, fans develop strong emotional connections with the band. The ‘Love Myself’ campaign is primarily for teenagers. It shows that the band values and cares about its fan base and is well aware of their well-being. It makes fans feel important. This feeling develops a desire in the mind of the consumers to express their gratitude by coming for their concert tours, joining the fan club, and purchasing merchandise. They are constantly launching events and products, and fans actively and positively respond to such stimuli, thus participating and contributing towards consumerism. On top of that, the K-pop agency is constantly and consistently in touch with the fan base. They are constantly monitoring the engagement level of the fans, and based on the response, they are tailoring existing products and launching new products and experiences for the fans, resulting in the creation of a continuous and ever-building cycle of consumerism – Hyper-consumerism.

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