

K-Pop Revolution of American Culture

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It is hard to believe that the music industry that has completely taken over America originated in South Korea. K-pop had evolved from Korean pop music to a unique culture encapsulating both American and Korean ideals. Youtube Originals's in-depth documentary, *K-Pop Evolution* did a wonderful job displaying an abundance of information about the spread of K-pop in an entertaining and immersive way. Prior to watching this documentary series, I was presented with information in pieces; I struggled to understand the connections. However, I was able to truly retain prior information and draw connections between small details in a way I could have never understood before watching this 172 minute behemoth of a documentary. I dove further into the origin, international spread, and subcultures of K-pop. The series made it very clear that America and K-pop have hugely influenced each other.

The documentary series covers a variety of topics within K-pop culture. I was able to appreciate how the series went into such depth with copious amounts of information per episode. The first episode of the series, *The Birth of K-Pop*, showcased interviews with many popular idols from the 1990s and 2000s or, first generation of K-pop. Many of the first producers and idols were Korean-Americans who brought their knowledge of diverse American music to a homogeneous audience. Musicians started taking inspiration from African American hip-hop. Jae Chong, a member of one of the first K-pop groups ever formed, stated that K-pop music at its core is an "intricate Korean melody mixed with [an American/]Western beat" (Youtube Originals). The second episode, *First Idols*, showed how the industry promotes the idea that K-pop idols are supposed to be perfect figures. Idols are more than just singers and dancers; they are supposed to represent the epitome of Korean youth (Youtube Originals). In order to

achieve this perfection, idols are treated and trained as a product. K-pop is popular in America because people are fascinated seeing perfect, attractive, exotic, and talented young men and women perform. In the third episode, *K-pop Goes Global*, the episode looks deeper into how K-pop evolved to expand to countries outside of South Korea. K-pop companies wanted their idols to hit it big in the Japanese music industry. According to Bernie Cho, the CEO of a Korean digital marketing agency called DFSB Collective, "Japan has the second [most successful] music industry market in the world" (Youtube Originals). It was considered to be impossible to make it big in America as a Korean person. However in 2012, PSY's song *Gangnam Style* broke the barrier between K-pop and America. It became internationally known for its bizarre music video visuals and upbeat sound. In the fourth episode, *Fandom*, the journalists of this documentary series did a deep dive into the fandom subculture of K-pop. K-pop fans are truly unique in the way that they support their idols; they compete with other fan groups to stream music and buy collectable CDs. In addition to purchasing official merchandise, K-pop fans often make their own merchandise to give out at concerts to make friends and connect with others. In the fifth and sixth episodes, *Lives of Idols: Trainees* and *Lives of Idols: Final Assessment*, it gave the audience a small glimpse into the everyday lives of extremely young and aspiring idols. There is extreme pressure put upon these young people: many drop out of school to train full-time, many diet to lose weight, many seek out plastic surgery, and many are not allowed to have romantic relationships. The last episode, *Making a K-Pop Music Video*, brought the audience along with famous producer Sunwook Kim to show the whole process of filming and

producing a K-pop music video. Overall, this documentary series took on a lot of different aspects that helped me learn more about K-pop culture as a whole.

K-Pop Evolution did not introduce many new ideas from the previous sources I have read. However, *K-pop Evolution* did help clarify a lot of the history behind K-pop and its connection to America's music scene. In Aja Romano's Vox article, *How K-Pop Became a global phenomenon*, they explain what makes a K-pop performer in great detail. The Vox article mentions how all K-pop idols are under a contract and are required to train for many years before having the chance of debuting; the K-pop industry is often claimed to be "exploitative... [and borderline] abusive" (Romano). In *K-pop Evolution's* "Lives of Idols: Trainees" episode, it is clear that trainees and idols are put under a lot of pressure by not only their company, but by the public as well. K-pop trainees would wake up early and not be allowed to rest until after midnight everyday (Youtube Originals). There are monthly evaluations to determine whether a trainee is talented, pretty, and skinny enough to continue training. I never realized how intense the training for trainees was prior to watching the series. In addition, a Washington Post article called *How K-Pop Conquered the Universe* introduced me to the term "hallyu", which is "the Korean wave: the idea that South Korean pop culture has grown in prominence to become a major driver of global culture" (Liu & Shin & Tan). The article did not go into much detail in regards to what hallyu actually was. In the third episode of *K-pop Evolution*, "K-Pop Goes Global", it talks about how Japan and China were originally the main consumers of the hallyu market. It was later revealed in the series that the US became the top consumer of hallyu culture in the mid 2010s.

With the help of *K-Pop Evolution*, I was able to fully deepen my understanding of how K-pop culture has a place in American society. This documentary series presented a ton of important information about niche, detailed parts of K-pop culture. It helped me understand that culture has unique language and priorities. I never knew about “hallyu” or the immense expectations and pressures that are put upon trainees before watching. In addition, I learned that culture can have other subcultures within it. For example, hallyu and trainee culture are all a part of overall K-pop culture. K-pop has completely evolved into a truly unique culture with unique phrases, expectations, and mindsets. At its origin, K-pop was completely influenced by American musical trends. American rock, jazz, and hip hop culture was brought to Korea to create a fresh and new sound. Currently, the dynamic has flipped, and K-pop is completely influencing America. PSY’s record-breaking song, “Gangnam Style” had American children and adults alike dancing along to his song. Since “Gangnam Style”, many popular idol groups originating from South-Korean entertainment countries have tours across the US. Big names such as BTS, NCT, and TWICE have sold out arenas in cities all over America. American fans are able to connect with their idols through social media and share the culture of K-pop to their friends and family, which contributed to the overall spread of K-pop through America.

The information in *K-Pop Evolution* was presented in a professional, unique, journalistic way that was truly unparalleled to any other K-pop documentary series. Once “Gangnam Style” was trending in America, the K-pop barrier was broken and hallyu began spreading like wildfire. America was forever changed and influenced by K-pop culture.

References

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