

Once You K-Pop, You Can't Keep Out

It's a Pandora's box but in the best way possible



Image Source: BigHit Entertainment; The biggest boyband of the world, BTS, are all about making fun memories even on their promotional photoshoot for their new album 'Map of the Soul: 7'

Imagine this.

Thousands of ardent fans singing along fluently to Korean lyrics for three hours non-stop.

In the crowd, there's a woman in her 30's from Saudi Arabia; a sociology degree holder boy from Africa; a group of elementary school best friends from the US and a 40-year-old dad with his teenage daughter from Ireland.

These people don't necessarily have a similar cultural background or speak the same language – and yet here they stand united, singing their lungs out to a comparatively difficult language from the East coast of the world.

But why? And how?!

ENTERING THE BLACK HOLE

Till several years ago, upon hearing the term 'BTS' you would have automatically thought of 'behind the scenes' and not the biggest boyband in the world.

BTS a.k.a 'Bangtan Sonyeondan' are a seven-member all-male group from South Korea that is topping charts and shaking the world with their heart-touching music and uplifting messages. You've probably heard of them on social media or seen them on red carpets and award shows. A fresh reminder would be BTS taking over the NYC Times Square 2020 Ball Drop attended by almost 1.5 million people this year (way more than the regular annual count!) Feel their power?

Let's not forget, they aren't the only K-Pop bands and artists scaling the music industry. Groups such as BlackPink, GOT7, Monsta X, Twice, and NCT 127 have been ardently and creatively collaborating with western artists and creating both English and Korean music for fans across the world.

I was dragged into this black hole of Korean Pop music or commonly known as K-Pop back in 2016 during my undergraduate days by my best friends already in the zone. It has been nearly six years of observing, understanding, and imitating a culture starkly different from my own to the point of learning a new language. While I can easily understand and speak basic and common words such as '*annyeonghaseyo*'(Hi), *mianhae* (Sorry), *gamsahamnida* (Thank you), *Saranghae* (I love you) etc., I am far from being fluent.

This tricky language uses different levels of tones, words and countless dialects that can also be specific to a region or state. These words also vary depending on other factors such as age gaps, interpersonal relationships and gender and can be further split either in a formal, casual, and informal tone.

Learning a new language from scratch is way harder than it seems. But there are others out there who take on this challenge wholeheartedly.

Zynia D'Souza, a professional graphic designer admits teaching herself Korean was difficult, but she didn't give up," It [K-Pop] got me into K-dramas. Also got me interested in the Korean language to the extent that I learnt to read, write and speak it at a conversational level by myself." Thousands of K-Pop fans have a similar backstory and inspiration.

While there are several popular mobile apps and language learning websites, Duolingo and Google Translate, apart from the YouTube tutorials are widely accepted. And that's what most enthusiasts are doing, using such apps, or taking Korean courses as a second language in school and university. According to a Modern Language Association of America (MLA) report released in June 2019, Korean as a secondary language choice has grown to almost 75% in US educational institutions.

THE HALLYU WAVE

In retrospect, it's not just the language that has gained popularity. For Raiza Fernandes, an International Business Management student studying in Canada, learning Korean as a language comes second compared to all the other cultural aspects of the country, "In my daily life K-Pop has helped me understand the Korean culture from their food to fashion to language to behaviour and the way they respect their elders. K-Pop is the reason I have gone out and tasted Korean cuisine which is delicious and is now part of my top five favourite cuisines. The way the Koreans dress and style themselves is so intriguing and inspires me all the time."



Image Source: GeniusWorks; 'Hallyu' refers to the Korean Wave of K-Pop and other Korean cultural influence outside of the country.

With the globalization of the world, it is not surprising that we have access to a wider variety of languages and cultures than before.

Based on her own experiences and surroundings, Michelle Cho, assistant professor at the University of Toronto's department of East Asian studies decided to explore this world of Korean culture and music influence, also known as the Korean Wave, literally translated from the Chinese term 'Hallyu'.

In an interview with University of Toronto's reporter Alexa Zulak in 2019, Michelle elaborated on the wide-spread cultural impact of this phenomenon, "I think that the rising interest in Korean language, culture and history – and just Korean studies in general – is coming from the increased visibility of Korean pop culture."

BANGTAN SONYEONDAN

BTS's septet RM, Jin, Suga, J-Hope, Jimin, V and Jungkook are beacons of light and safety boats for millions across the world in this K-Pop abound world. The band consists of rappers, vocals, and dancers, although most of them begin training in all the aspects of performing right from a young age when they join the company, in this case, Big Hit Entertainment. They have managed to create their own name and niche in the music industry after seven years of blood, sweat and tears. (Fun fact: BTS's claim to fame in the US and other countries in 2016 was the aesthetically visual song 'Blood, Sweat and Tears'.)

An 'ARMY', the universal and official name for all BTS fans and the fandom overall is one that most fans proudly accept. When asked what she loves about BTS, a hardcore-fan and Fine Arts student in Belgium, Nikshitha Raja states, "Their music, dance and style. They know how

to communicate with their fans! They always make time for us and show us their love and do their best. And we as fans want to do the same for them!" And research shows that ARMY is the most popular fandom compared to any other artist, Korean or otherwise.



Image Source: BigHit Entertainment; BTS pose amid sculptor Anthony Gormley's metal tumbleweed artwork in New York in support and promotion of their campaign 'CONNECT, BTS'

Most, if not all K-Pop groups are popular in Asian countries and have an astounding fanbase that Venn diagrams into other groups, but the end line remains the love, respect and inspiration fans see in them. Their growing influence across the West Coast, the changing trends and tastes are catching attention and adding to this widespread

And with the onset of social struggles and protests and injustice, words have the power to soothe. Irrespective of the language, pop music tends to be lyrically meaningful and passes on an important message; social, mental, or abstract. This genre has grown to dominate the 21st century and K-Pop fits right in!

BTS is at the top of putting out music that makes a difference. With songs ranging from love to death to power play and calling out on injustice, they've done it all.

True to their title as 'global top artists', the boys are proving how far their influence can transform and encourage people beyond the realm of music itself. The band has ventured into collaborating with global contemporary artists in promoting artworks around the world

by sharing the project 'CONNECT, BTS'. The campaign has garnered enough attention by combining the band's philosophical message of self-expression and self-love and the creative forms of contemporary art to inspire viewers in new ways.

Arguably, not everyone is a fan of BTS, but they do admire the need and creation of positive concepts via music. The same goes for Veena Ravi, a professional writer and avid fan of old-school K-Pop rock bands such as KARD and B.A.P and chooses her music on what they offer her in terms of lyrics and message, "The music they [K-Pop bands] make interests me. The lyrics and the concept they use is something I would listen to. Unlike groups that always sing about love or girls, these groups also branch out and focus on issues like mental health and having fun."

THE FUTURE OF LEARNING KOREAN

Bringing the world even closer, Big Hit Entertainment's CEO Bang Si Hyuk announced the making of a Korean learning application on February 4th at their annual 'Big Hit Company Corporate Briefing with the Community'. At this gathering, current and upcoming news regarding the groups under their management are revealed, also including plans to bring the community closer. The news was received joyously by fans since ARMYs end up having to translate live videos, lyrics, and subtitles via Google Translate or by following translator blogs and Korean fan sites but with this app, things would be much easier.

The app is named 'Learn! Korean With BTS' and you guessed it right, users get to learn Korean with the help of existing BTS memes, videos and gifs from older content to understand the language in a more fun and memorable way.

As an avid BTS fan, this news bodes well with me, an amateur looking forward to learning a new language in an easier way. For all you know, other K-Pop groups might follow suit and create their own versions of Korean learning apps. This would push all boundaries of language geographically and linguistically creating bonds of mutual love and hope towards a more connected world.

It seems like finally, the world is understanding that music transcends all and languages are no more a barrier to create, inspire and heal humanity in these trying times.