

## Achievement in the South Korean music industry

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### *Abstract*

*South Korean Pop music, commonly referred to as K-pop, emerged in the 1990s and reached regional and global recognition in the early 2000s, with a peak in 2018 with the two groups BTS and BLACKPINK. Their relative global success is explained in this article as an interplay of a G-L-G (Global-Local-Global) business model, beauty, artistic and personality skills at the individual level, and idiosyncratic factors, such as particular songwriting capabilities and hit songs. This interplay was designed for market penetration in the US and UK.*

**Keywords:** K-pop, Hallyu, South Korea, Korean wave, BTS, BLACKPINK

### 1 Introduction

Many might associate contemporary South Korea with high Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, as well as rapid technological and economic development since the 1980s. Another element which is linked to modern South Korea is its pop cultural industry, especially K-pop, an umbrella term for South Korean popular music. The appeal of K-pop has been ascribed to physically attractive group members, globally fashionable pop music, and synchronized dance performances (Oh 2013). While several K-pop acts such as Big Bang, TVXQ, Girls' Generation, Super Junior, and EXO have reached local (South Korea) and regional (East Asia) success (Lie 2013; Lie 2014; Oh 2013), these acts have failed to penetrate the major music markets of the US and UK. An attempt was made in the US by Girls' Generation with the single and music video "The Boys" in 2011, which was launched in an English version. The group even performed on the David Letterman show but the

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effort failed (Lee 2013). While Japan is by far the second largest music market in the world (IFPI 2018), global success is essentially translated into success in the US. With an aggregated retail value of nearly six billion US dollars, the US market is more extensive than most of the other top twenty national markets combined (see table 1).

- 1 USA (5,916.1 US \$ millions)
- 2 Japan (2,727.5 US \$ millions)
- 3 Germany (1,323.1 US \$ millions)
- 4 UK (1,310.7 US \$ millions)
- 5 France (925.1 US \$ millions)
- 6 South Korea (494.4 US \$ millions)
- 7 Canada (437.1 US \$ millions)
- 8 Australia (412.9 US \$ millions)
- 9 Brazil (295.8 US \$ millions)
- 10 China (292.3 US \$ millions)
- 11 Netherlands (269.5 US \$ millions)
- 12 Italy (247.9 US \$ millions)
- 13 Spain (205.9 US \$ millions)
- 14 Sweden (199.5 US \$ millions)
- 15 Norway (139.0 US \$ millions)
- 16 Denmark (137.9 US \$ millions)
- 17 Switzerland (137.8 US \$ millions)
- 18 Mexico (137.0 US \$ millions)
- 19 India (130.7 US \$ millions)
- 20 Argentina (130.0 US \$ millions)

Table 1: Music markets, with total retail value (IFPI Global Music Report 2018)

Hence, the goal of many pop artists and groups, regardless of origin, is to break into this particular market. The Korean artist Psy succeeded in the US and globally with his music video "Gangnam Style", which has surpassed three billion views on YouTube, but it is both a statistical outlier and not even considered "real" K-pop by many fans; Psy is consid-

ered to be fat, silly, and not nearly as attractive as the plethora of young male performers in the majority of K-pop groups (Lie 2013).

A reason for the hardship of K-pop acts to reach far-reaching success in the Anglo countries (US, UK, Canada and Australia) is related to language barriers. Even though K-pop groups partially sing in English and the lyrics treat universal messages like romantic love and have significant shares of fans among the Korean and East Asian diasporas in these countries (Lie 2014), it requires more effort to reach success in these Anglo nations. The US market is largely insular (Power & Hallencreutz 2003), as is the market of Japan (Lie 2014) and this demands adaption or localization of foreign artists. For instance, K-pop groups like TVXQ, Kara, and Girls' Generation have successfully been altered to fit the Japanese market, especially in regard to language. Most songs are also sung in Japanese in order to appeal to Japanese consumers. One of the most successful girl groups, TWICE, even consists of Japanese and Korean members. This group has become massively popular in these two countries (Soompi 2018). The US has seen many foreign-born singers succeed, like Shakira (Colombia), Rihanna (Barbados), and Nicki Minaj (Trinidad & Tobago), but these artists have been Americanized and have lived in the US throughout most of their careers. If Korean artists and groups were to succeed, they would have to make similar adjustments and perhaps even leave the East Asian ambit behind. But even such drastic measures would, of course, not guarantee success.

However, there are two recent examples of K-pop groups which have managed to become global stars by penetrating the US and UK markets to a significant extent: the four-member girl group BLACKPINK and the seven-member boy band BTS (Bangtan Boys). In the case of BLACKPINK, the song "Ddu-du ddu-uu" and the collaboration song with the ultra-successful English female singer Dua Lipa, "Kiss and Make up", have reached the UK top 40 (Korea Boo 2018a). The group has also entered the Billboard Hot 100 chart with "Ddu-du ddu-uu" at the end of June 2018 (Billboard 2018a). "Ddu-du ddu-uu" has more than 700 million views on YouTube. BTS has reached even more success, with sold-out concerts in the UK (Pink 2018) and US (Rolli 2018), receipt of highly

prestigious awards in the US (Billboard 2018b) and East Asia (2018 Mnet Asian Music Awards). They have also launched many successful music videos.

The two groups have proven that the success of K-pop is not only limited to local and regional markets in East Asia and Southeast Asia but that acts, despite the Korean language, can reach far-reaching success in the major national markets. They have achieved this success with essentially the same concepts as the groups that were launched around 2010. They have genuinely become global *hallyu* (Korean wave) stars, a trope that Korean media misguidedly rode on after a series of smaller concerts in Paris (Ho 2012: 482).

Therefore, the unique individual and sociocultural factors, which underlie achievement in the South Korean music industry must be properly explained. Furthermore, there are dimensions of this music industry that other local markets may absorb. For example, the Swedish market has decreased its retail value relative to South Korea during the last five years. Individual Swedish artists such as Zara Larsson have succeeded in the US and UK. However, it is mainly songwriters and producers that Sweden (as well as all of Scandinavia) is known for in this regard. Although the decreased market size is primarily a consequence of drops in physical and digital sales (IFPI 2018), it is obvious that Sweden and other Scandinavian countries have no BTS or BLACKPINK. Perhaps the necessary character skills can be absorbed by talented individuals who wish to succeed as pop stars, or by other export-oriented countries – Sweden and others – that want to distribute music to other local markets in the global matrix of popular culture?

Therefore, this article analyzes the individual (character skills), endogenous (local), and exogenous (global) factors, which underlie the success of K-pop artists in general and these two groups in particular. The first step of the analysis will focus on the individual factors in relation to broader sociocultural patterns in South Korea. The second step of the analysis examines artist development within the frames of South Korean K-pop companies. The third step of the analysis highlights the debut of K-pop groups and the factors underlying their relative success

(or lack thereof). It will also discuss how other talented individuals and local producers and distributors can adapt strategies to export global pop music in a similar fashion. Lastly, it will discuss some downsides of the South Korean music industry.

#### The emergence of K-pop

Typically, Korea and Japan have received and experienced most of the cultural flows from China (and in Japan's case, via Korea) until the middle of the nineteenth century. This trend shifted when Japan became a regional superpower and colonized Korea from 1910 until 1945. During that time, Korea indirectly received much cultural, technological and economic elements from the West via Japan (Lie 2014).

After World War II, and the partition in 1948, South Korea has continued to be affected by its larger and more powerful neighbor but not to the same extent. Even K-pop was influenced by Japanese pop (J-Pop) in the 1990s. The first K-pop act was Seo Taiji and the Boys who made their debut in 1992, followed by H.O.T. in 1996. Since then, an astonishing amount of female and male groups have debuted in the South Korean music industry: Wonder Girls, BoA, Super Junior, Shinee, TVXQ, SNSD (Girls' Generation), Kara, Tara, Big Bang, 2NE1, EXO, BTS and BLACKPINK to name just a few. Many of these debuted between 2002–2007 while several new acts were formed in the 2010s, when K-pop became globally recognized (Oh & Park 2012; Lie 2012).

These days, South Korea does not have to bypass Japan but can go directly to Western songwriters and producers whenever they aim to export popular music to foreign markets. Oh (2013) refers to the relative success of K-pop as involving a G-L-G (Global-Local-Global) business model. K-pop is global pop music in the sense that it largely builds upon existing fashionable pop music and often, but not always, the producers of it use Western songwriters and producers in order to maximize its market potential. Many band members originate from outside Korea from countries such as China, Taiwan, Thailand, Canada, the United States or Australia (members must be of some kind of East Asian origin, however, at least at this point). It is also local in so far that numbers,

good looks, and voice-dance interaction are the differential factors, or comparative advantages, which separate K-pop from other East Asian performers and local markets (Oh 2013; Jang & Kim 2013). South Korean companies such as S.M. Entertainment, YG Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, Cube Entertainment, Big Hit Entertainment, Pledis Entertainment and others have more or less successfully trained, groomed, and produced a "total package" of K-pop groups: everything from the selection, training and grooming processes of band members, song and video production, to interviews and commitments in overlapping industries such as film, TV series and commercials are in the hands of these agencies. Besides use of the Korean language, which is often mixed with English phrases, the business model and the outcomes of such a structure, are uniquely South Korean (Oh 2013; Lie 2012). As Lie (2012, 2014) notes, K-pop is not purely Korean from an historical perspective because it is influenced by Japanese and Western elements and structures (which stem from both how companies and the military are organized) but even something hybridized may still be understood as having a distinctively local trait.

In a later consecutive step, K-pop is launched via global media tools such as YouTube, iTunes, Facebook and Twitter for the world's consumers (Oh 2013; Oh & Park 2012). Additionally, Spotify and Instagram matter for the dissemination of music, news, visibility of groups and group members, as well fans and their communities. BTS won the Best Social Media Artist Award (Billboard 2018b) and has an enormous global fanbase, which is manifested by their Twitter account with approximately 18 million followers (BTS Twitter). BLACKPINK has a dominating presence on Instagram with over 15 million followers on their official account (BLACKPINK Instagram).

## **2 Theoretical model of the South Korean music industry**

### **2.1 Beauty standards**

Aside from the audiovisual material present in the songs, music videos and live performances, K-pop is signified by two things: good looks and dancing/singing capability. Very few applications from young prospects, maybe as low as  $\frac{1}{2,000}$  will be selected by the major agencies, and only around 20–30 out of 1,000 will appear professionally (Lie 2012).

While a 0.7 hip-to-waist ratio (Singh 2007), symmetrical and proportional facial features, healthy-looking skin and long, lustrous hair are considered attractive female features in a cross-cultural context, every nation or region has its own set of particularities (Meston & Buss 2009; Buss 1989). In South Korea and Japan, general female beauty standards involve being skinny and having long legs, whereas male beauty standards having a thin yet athletic body type and attractive facial features (Epstein & Joo 2012; Oh & Park 2012; Korea Boo 2018b). While beauty is subjective, and tastes differ widely among individuals, it is commonly known that short legs and stature and excessive body fat indicate partial lack of beauty in this context.

### **2.2 Personality skills (Big 5)**

Heckman & Kautz (2014) have studied character skills, sometimes referred to as non-cognitive abilities, soft skills or personality traits, in relation to educational and occupational achievement in depth. IQ is associated with both educational and vocational performance but appears to have a low correlation with success in the music industry. A possible link could be the theory of multiple intelligences, particularly musical and bodily-kinesthetic abilities (Gardner 1983). However, such abilities are not well-measured by IQ tests (Nisbett 2010). Another link could be the possible connection between creativity and intelligence, perhaps mediated by the openness to experience trait of the Big Five, that has been investigated in psychological research. However, the association is disputed or ambiguous (Plucker & Esping 2015) and K-pop art-

ists do not even have to be particularly creative since the companies are mainly responsible for that part. Hence, intelligence will not be considered regarding individual artistic achievement.

However, character skills (such as the Big 5 personality traits), seem to be highly associated with high performance in the competitive and stressful South Korean music industry. Heckman & Kautz (2014: 350) stress that character skills, such as personality traits, do not require measurement by standard questionnaires. Instead they can be examined through observable "tasks" or items, whether tests, school degrees or other accomplishments, "Many believe that personality skills can only be assessed by self-reported questionnaires that elicit skills like the Big Five. However, performances on any task or any observed behavior can be used to measure skills." I will use a similar approach to analyse artistic abilities in the K-pop industry. It is also important to underscore that character skills are universal and as such valid concepts in non-Western cultures (ibid: 343).

The Big Five comprises Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. Each major personality trait is associated with at least two major facets and several related skills. Openness to experience is associated with fantasy, artistic/aesthetic ability, feelings, and unconventional ideas and experiences. Conscientiousness is linked to competence, dutifulness, striving for achievement, perseverance, delay of gratification, and self-discipline. Extraversion is associated with self-confidence, gregariousness, and excitement seeking. Agreeableness is connected to trust, altruism, compliance, modesty, and tender-mindedness. Neuroticism is linked to anxiety, hostility, depression, impulsiveness, and vulnerability (ibid: 348–349). The opposite of neuroticism is emotional stability, which is positively associated with job performance (Stueder-Luethi et al. 2012).

### **2.3 Endogenous (local) and exogenous (global) factors**

As has been explained, Oh (2013) refers to the relative success of K-pop as a G-L-G business model. An interplay between global and local factors is crucial throughout the three steps of the process, which eventually



lead to the launching of K-pop groups, although only the third step requires the last G of the G-L-G model, when the products are distributed for a global audience. Of course, such a model may not capture all endogenous and exogenous factors but as a general pattern it is consistent with the production and dissemination of K-pop. However, a differential idiosyncratic factor is the specific production value of each group in regard to songs, music videos, and the attractiveness of group members. As Lie (2013) underlines, one can never predict which songs or groups will become widely successful. Therefore, hit songs, timing, and luck constitute significant idiosyncratic factors which will be discussed later in the text.

### **3 Methodology**

I have primarily studied research literature that is linked to the Korean wave and K-pop, and to media outlets which specialize in K-pop (Korea Boo), as well as the songs, music videos and live performances of BLACKPINK (music videos between 2016–2018) and BTS (music videos between 2013–2018). I have also analyzed relevant YouTube videos in order to explain the consecutive steps of becoming a globally successful K-pop group. Further, I have also studied the YouTube material related to other groups and artists that represent this genre in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of K-pop.

Since beauty and artistic capabilities are required if applicants are to be accepted as trainees in a K-pop company, these two differential factors have been estimated as low (0.10), moderate (0.25), or high (0.75). Since low levels of beauty and artistic capabilities are not acceptable within the South Korean music industry these mainly provide comparative value.

I have also estimated the level of character skills on the basis of the Big Five with inspiration from the analytical approach of Heckman & Kautz (2014). The measures of these five personality skills among K-pop artists are understood here to be a continuous variable. This provides a scholarly understanding of the psychological dimensions of the artistic

side of the K-pop business. The requirement of different levels of the Big Five for the generic K-pop artist is estimated as low (0.10), moderate (0.25), or high (0.75). While such a demarcation – much like levels of beauty – appears arbitrary, it is reasonable to assume that no individual has neither 1.0 nor 0.0 in, for example, conscientiousness, and that such an ultra-high level is required to succeed in any occupation. Conscientiousness predicts job performance with a 0.20–0.25 correlational effect size (Heckman et al 2014), but high-performing artists in a very competitive market niche such as K-pop must have magnified levels if they are to succeed. Based on the scores from step one and two, a value formula is constructed.

Lastly, the G-L-G model (step 3) in conjunction with idiosyncratic factors (productive value, hit potential, timing and luck) explain the patterns of relative success among K-pop groups within the global music industry.

## **4 Results**

### **4.1 Step 1: Selection process**

As Ho (2012), Lie (2012) and Jang & Kim (2013) assert, many young South Koreans and East Asians (and their parents) want their children to become K-pop stars (or "idols" as they are commonly referred to in South Korea). While it is also attractive to work for a large corporation or the government (Oh 2010; Hultberg et al. 2017), K-pop manifests one, if not the highest, measure of socioeconomic success in contemporary South Korea. Therefore, individual striving is directly linked to the socio-cultural conditions of the country (Jang & Kim 2013). Since competition starts early, a significant share of Koreans with artistic ambitions, perhaps even as an extracurricular activity in elementary school or middle school (Sang et al. 2015), will start dancing and singing practice between 10–15 years of age, often in K-pop cram schools, which will increase their chances of success in the selection process. Such pursuits are often supported by parents (Ho 2012). Further, such schools aim to inculcate

certain values that will increase the applicants' chances in the selection process. Ho (2012: 480) explains how this pattern is related to K-pop cram schools:

*"The agency also controls how trainees are grouped and groomed, and subjects all trainees to a comprehensive inseong gyoyuk that teaches trainees to inculcate and practice values such as humility, obedience, loyalty and gratitude. The focus on inseong gyoyuk is on family values, the purpose of which was explained to me by several corporate trainers as threefold: to assure parents that their young are being educated properly to develop "proper values," to teach trainees to display behaviors that are highly regard as by the wider Korean society and, more importantly, to subordinate trainees to the authority of their respective agencies as dependents are expected to do so to authoritative figures in the family."*

Apart from the audiovisual material present in songs, music videos, and live performances, K-pop is signified by two elements: good looks and artistic capabilities. Artists are selected because of their relative attractiveness and ability to dance and sing. Very few applications from young prospects, maybe as low as  $\frac{1}{1000}$ , will be selected by the major agencies through applications or auditions (Lie 2012). There are other ways to be discovered however, such as the scouting of potential artists of the agencies, applications to less established agencies (JYP Entertainment, YG Entertainment, SM Entertainment, and Big Hit Entertainment are currently the most successful K-pop companies), and by way of participation in competitive TV shows. For example, the Japanese/Korean twelve-member girl group IZ ONE was formed in the Korean channel Mnet's show "Produce 48". 96 participants resulted in 12 winners who formed the new group. However, these artists had already been selected as trainees by various K-pop agencies. Perhaps another novel strategy would be to be scouted on YouTube as a capable cover dancer. On the other hand, skilled and physically attractive K-pop cover dancers like the Asian-American couple Ellen Min and Brian Li have remained in their market niche on YouTube instead of joining a new K-pop group.

Hence, genetic beauty potential and artistic skills become differential factors. Generally, high levels of beauty (0.75) are required but some artists only have moderate levels (0.25), which is evident in the case of the short members of Girls' Generation (Sunny), Seventeen (Woozi), and IZ ONE (Nako), or in the case of the overweight members of Super Junior (Shindong, Kangin). A reason for this lack of complete visual consistency is that groups are partly formed as a concept, and fans can pick their favorites among several types of members (Lie 2012). Moreover, weight loss can often be accomplished later, and must in any case be valued in relation to other artistic skills (singing, dancing) and individual popularity. On the other hand, no members of BLACKPINK or BTS are either short or overweight and most can arguably be regarded as being highly attractive according to Korean and East Asian beauty standards.

I suggest that artistic skills are rank ordered as low (0.10), intermediate (0.25), or high (0.75). Since some degree of acquired artistic capability is required, it must be either intermediate or high for all prospects. However, it appears as if a highly attractive (0.75) prospect may be accepted with moderate skills (0.25), whereas a moderately attractive individual (0.25) must express high artistic skills (0.75). Thus, the artistic formula is  $A 0.25 \times AS 0.75$  or  $A 0.25 \times AS 0.75$  or  $A 0.75 \times AS 0.75$ . The rest of the variability in selection is linked to arbitrary judgment or bias. A small fraction of individuals is selected by the K-pop companies during early adolescence and, if successful, they are expected to make their artistic debut around 16–20 years of age (Oh & Park 2012).

#### **4.2 Step 2: Grooming and education**

In a later step, an artistic educational process begins, which includes both aesthetics, singing and dancing, language skills, and personality training. Oh & Park (2012: 383) interviewed the CEO of the K-pop company SM Entertainment, Young-Min Kim regarding this:

*"I know our training system is elitist, and therefore we see many dropouts from our rigid training every day. We have no idea how to help the dropouts. I am just worried that too many young kids want to volunteer and compete for our head start programs. Honestly, we have no*

*idea how to help the dropouts. But I can assure that SM does not violate their human rights or sexually abuse them. That I can guarantee."*

South Korea has been criticized for its extremely status- and education-oriented system and beauty obsession, which may lead to increased suicide rates and levels of stress (Hultberg et al. 2017; Ahn & Baek 2012). The dropout rates, although being less harmful, indicate that only high levels of conscientiousness (C) (0.75) and emotional stability (E) (0.75) are optimal for continuing the process as a K-pop trainee or artist. This is arguably why several members of the moderately successful girl group 9 Muses left the group after their debut (BBC 2014) As a consequence of anxiety issues, ChoA, member of the moderately successful girl group AOA, left the group after five years (Korea Boo 2017).

While perhaps less stable, since K-pop professionalism (Lie 2012, 2014) might imply to fake agreeableness (A), openness to experience (O), and behaviors associated with extraversion (E), it is reasonable to assume that high levels (0.75) of these three traits are required. For example, self-confidence and a willingness to perform in front of thousands of fans in South Korea and other locations are associated with assertiveness (a sub-trait of extraversion) and openness to experience (artistic). Moderate to high agreeableness is required to obey company superiors and be gentle to fans. Thus, a conservative estimate is moderate to high, implying an average score of 0.5, of agreeableness, openness to experience, and extraversion. Thus, I suggest the aggregated Big Five formula for successful K-pop trainees to be:

$$C (0.75) \times ES (0.75) \times A (0.5) \times E (0.5) \times O (0.5)$$

While one can expect that accepted trainees will have better genetic potential than the average Korean or East Asian individual in regard to beauty, many will go through a vast transformation process. As the artist is being trained and groomed within the confines of the respective company to which they are signed, he or she will maintain a very slender physique, use skin care (to have better skin quality and in some cases to have lighter skin), exercise (mostly dance practice but also gym exercise), and plastic surgery to maximize the individual's genetic potential.

Some of these artists might have been accomplished performers prior to the trainee process. The latter does often include the so-called K-pop double: eyelid and nose surgery. Furthermore, it may include jawline surgery. This will create a regionally, even universally, appealing appearance (Oh & Park 2012; Lie 2012). Hence, the level of attractiveness can be raised from moderate (0.25) to high (0.75), remain moderate, or remain high. Artistic skills are expected to remain high (0.75) or increase from moderate (0.25) to high (0.75) because of the training system. Hence, I suggest that the aesthetic and artistic formula after the training program is:

$$\text{Beauty (0.25–0.75)} \times \text{Artistic skills (0.75)}$$

#### **4.3 Step 3: Debut and the goal of local and global success**

The third step after a group has been formed is to make a debut, which the artists themselves sometimes pay for thereby going into debt with the K-pop companies. While the major companies pay the performers their shares of the revenues without the imposition of debt, the latter are generally paid in the last instance and with low shares of the total revenues. The company, producers, and songwriters are paid prior to artists (Oh & Park 2012; Ho 2012).

In order to reach significant revenue from the investments in trainees, groups, and group members, the companies produce music videos and disseminate the content via YouTube, launch EPs, singles and albums through Spotify and iTunes, and enable live performances on Mnet and elsewhere. This stream of revenues is added to by the consumption of related products such as merchandise (Oh & Park 2012; Ho 2012). K-pop is generally understood to have a high production value (Oh 2013), which implies large investments in artistic training, songwriting, dance choreographies, music videos, and fashion items from expensive Western brands such as Gucci, Chanel, Louis Vuitton and Dior. All of these are manifested in the music videos that BLACKPINK and BTS launched between 2016–2018. The visual technology, combined with makeup, can artificially enhance beauty to an even greater extent.

A group debut is generally followed by several comebacks, unless the group is too unprofitable and/or its members are too indebted to continue to exist. Members must also continue to possess the same Big Five formula as individuals, because otherwise they might drop out. While BLACKPINK reached almost instant success 2016 onwards, BTS has existed since 2013 and made their breakthrough in 2015 with "Dope" and peaked in 2018 (see table 2).

YouTube views (of the three most successful songs and music videos, Date of access: March 25 2019)

BLACKPINK: "Ddu-du Ddu-du" (723 million views), "As if it's your last" (550 million views), "Boombayah" (538 million views)

BTS: "DNA" (676 million views), "Fire" (523 million views), "Fake love" (481 million views)

Charts (US and UK, 2018)

BLACKPINK: Billboard Hot 100 (number 55), Billboard Top 200, Official UK top 40 ("Ddu-du Ddu-du", "Kiss and make up")

BTS: Billboard Artist 100 (number 1), UK Top 40 Single ("Idol", number 21)

Awards (US and East Asia, 2018)

BLACKPINK: Mnet Asian Music Awards (four nominees)

BTS: Billboard Awards (Top Social artist), Mnet Asian Music Awards (Artist of the Year, Album of the year, Worldwide icon of the year)

Table 2: Indicators of global success

This process appears to be linked to three major factors: the maximum production value generated by both the performers and the companies' investments, the hit potential of songs and music videos, and timing/luck. For example, audiences in the UK and US were finally ready

for K-pop in 2018, although the collaboration with Dua Lipa partly obscured the impact of that particular song – fans in the UK were more interested in Dua Lipa than BLACKPINK. On the other hand, Dua Lipa (or her company) would never have made the collaboration if BLACKPINK was not already famous after "Ddu-du Ddu-du", which entered the UK chart earlier the same year. The same pattern manifests itself in relation to BTS' collaboration with Nicki Minaj, in an alternative version of "Idol". At that point they had already reached global success and performed at major shows in the US.

1. Global: Global pop music and technological infrastructure (Google), foreign-born artists, and foreign songwriters and choreographers
2. Local: Korean agencies with export incentives, and local talent
3. Global: Distribution of high-quality K-pop groups through technological infrastructure (YouTube, iTunes, Twitter etc.)

Source: Oh (2013)



Global success (in US and UK)

Global failure (in US and UK)

Idiosyncratic factors

1. Hit song

1. Non-hit song

2. Good timing

2. Bad timing

3. Luck

3. No luck

Table 3: G-L-G model and idiosyncratic factors that determine success/failure



With regard to songwriting and production, Teddy Park has made significant contributions to BLACKPINK and Pdogg to BTS. Hence, they constitute important idiosyncratic differential factors of the success of these two groups (see table 3).

#### **4.4 Potential lessons from and critical remarks on the South Korean music industry**

According to a neoliberal logic, there are individual, endogenous, and exogenous factors that other local markets can absorb from the South Korean music industry in general and the success stories of BLACKPINK and BTS in particular. First, character skills, specifically linked to the process of becoming a local and global pop star. Many of these training programs are well-known in the West, since they ultimately stem from the US (Lie 2014). For example, currently the world's most commercially successful pop artist, Ariana Grande, has carried through similar grooming – including weight loss – prior to her major US debut in 2013. However, K-pop artists, who survive fierce competition and intense training, appear to have optimized levels of conscientiousness, emotional stability, agreeableness, extraversion, and openness to experience. While these are typically understood as personality traits, they are partly malleable and many of the associated skills and behaviors are possible to magnify or modify (Heckman & Kautz 2014).

As for the particular group concept in K-pop, both synchronized dance formations and attractive group members constitute elements that can be absorbed without the mere imitation of South Korean artists. Countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands do already have large pools of attractive young people (whether foreign-born or not), as well as networks of producers, songwriters, and the necessary infrastructure. In fact, many of the established songwriters in K-pop (although not the most successful, who are of Korean origin) live in these countries (Lie 2012; Oh & Park 2012). If K-pop is mainly understood as a local version of global/Western pop music, then it is reasonable to create other local forms and export them worldwide. Since Scandinavian welfare states impose less competitive and external pressure

on their youth, such companies and training structures will also be more humane. For instance, plastic surgery and thinness are less widespread.

As several scholarly contributions and the more critical remarks from Korea Boo and others have observed, generally K-pop-biased outlets suggest that there are several downsides to the South Korean music industry. While some of these problems have been solved, at least in part (Oh 2013; Lie 2014), rampant elitism, unfair artist contracts, and even abuse of trainees and artists constitute obstacles that reflect upon the hyper-competitive Korean society, and which ultimately stem from semi-authoritarian contemporary capitalism.

## 5 Conclusion

The South Korean pop music industry has succeeded in general and in relation to BLACKPINK and BTS in particular. This is due to a combination of and interplay between individual, local, and global factors. Successful K-pop artists and groups (whether female or male), both throughout the selection process, during artistic training and grooming, and as professionals post their debuts, are moderately to highly attractive, express moderate to high levels of artistic skills (singing and dancing), and possess high levels of conscientiousness and emotional stability, as well as moderate to high levels of extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience. All Big Five personality skills (or traits) are, although to different extents, required to succeed. BLACKPINK and BTS have maximized these multifaceted skills, and, in conjunction with the typical G-L-G K-pop business model and idiosyncratic factors (hit songs, timing, luck), they have managed to reach significant success in the world's two major music markets, besides Japan, which are typically difficult to penetrate: the US and UK. While it may be possible for other local music markets to partially emulate the K-pop formula, it should come with an understanding of the downsides of hyper-competitiveness and elitism, which signify South Korean pop music.

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