



# K-pop – What’s in a Name?

ACADEMIC ARTICLE: ROUNDTABLE

## Ed. Dr. Candace Epps-Robertson

*Assistant Professor of English and Comparative Literature, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (United States)*

## Ed. Katie Hulme

*Physicist by day, (amateur) poet by night (United States)*

## Introduction

### What is a “Roundtable”?

A rhizome consists of a multitude of interconnected nodes – and while those nodes might have more that connects than divides them, individual nodes don’t always agree. Learning means being in conversation with one another. Our perspectives are often shaped by our immediate networks and personal experiences, and it never hurts to take a step back and invite some voices to the table – especially those we might not otherwise hear, and those that bring wisdom, experience, and specialized knowledge into the conversation.

“양극화 세상에서 가장 추한 꽃”

“Polarization, the ugliest flower in the world” (Agust D, 2020)

We have all witnessed heated and emotionally charged debates ignited by particular topics, fueled by the anonymity and speed afforded by social media. Discussions can quickly become polarized, and when polarization begins to play, discourse often begins to falter. Slowing down, taking time to pause, engaging with the ideas of others, and listening are essential to growth and creating new knowledge.

The most famous roundtable is probably that of the legendary King Arthur, who insisted that his knights sit at a roundtable because such a table has no head – thus no designated leader. The purpose of a roundtable is to invite individuals into a space where the notion of “us” and “them” is temporarily dispelled, and each voice is given an equal platform to articulate itself. You may not agree with each and every perspective, but we invite you to listen – and learn!

As a journal, we have much to learn about the best way to conduct these conversations — so please afford us some grace on our first attempt. This group of participants was patient and persistent, and we are thankful to each and every one of them for the time they devoted to this discussion.

So . . . may the first nodes of the roundtable convene!

## The K-pop Roundtable

In early 2020, a conversation between nine self-identified ARMYs from six different countries took place via a Twitter group chat (the anonymized transcript for this conversation can be viewed in the Appendix — all participants in the transcribed conversation consented to having it released). During this conversation, participants ruminated over the statement “BTS isn’t K-Pop” (a claim frequently asserted on social media within their networks). The discussion led them to asking a host of questions and a lively discussion ensued. Two of the overarching questions and themes from the discussion were:

*What exactly is K-pop?*

*Why do some fans (several participants included) feel compelled to make a distinction between BTS and K-pop? And is this response warranted?*

Ultimately, the participants chose to submit the transcript of their conversation to our Editorial Board because they wished to transition the discussion from a casual conversation to a constructive dialogue. With this in mind, our Editorial Board invited six individuals to our very first roundtable to discuss some of the topics raised in the aforementioned transcript. We hope you will join us in welcoming:

- @alapadma2
- Choi, Stephanie, Ph.D.
- Lee, Jeeheng, Ph.D.
- Saeji, CedarBough, Ph.D.
- Sang, Elliot
- Suh, Randy

While we wanted this roundtable to engage with some of the issues raised in that chat, we also sought to have this be a space for panelists to engage with issues, theories, and perspectives that are meaningful to them given their backgrounds and interests. Our panelists have a wide range of experience and each is committed to this discussion as a means to encourage dialogue and critical thinking. To that end, we invited them to raise questions, wrestle with terms, and reflect on why this conversation matters to so many. We know that defining terms is an essential first step to engaged discourse. Why do these steps — defining and theorizing — matter? They matter because language matters. Words carry ideas and ideologies that are often rooted in tangled webs of power. The discussion we present in this roundtable takes a first step at demonstrating the histories, theories, ideology, and ultimately the influence that goes into defining K-Pop.

## Methods

We invited participants based on experience, expertise, and their interest in the subject. Each was provided with a copy of the transcript and asked to respond to eight questions. Moderators read the responses and curated follow-up questions for discussion. Each participant then wrote a concluding statement.

# Round I

## Initial Questions

### What is K-pop? What is it not?

@ALAPADMA2

K-pop is “pop” — it is a form of popular entertainment that is based on how the music is produced, how the performances are staged, what kinds of business interests label companies have, how the content from these companies is distributed, and the means by which the audience can consume this content. So it is “pop” in the strict definition of what “pop” stands for (popular), but is it “pop” in terms of genre? That depends on how pop is defined as a genre, which is also an increasingly contentious debate. When we look at Western pop music today, we find that more sounds are being borrowed from cultures across the globe, more artists are exploring various genres throughout their albums, and the definitions for categorizing music have become more vague. Even in the Western context, “pop” is more of an industry than a genre. An artist can write music with elements of R&B or rock or country, but their process of promotion, distribution, performance, and consumption will have a great impact in determining if they are considered pop or not. While a particular sound has become associated with pop, it is largely due to the process of music creation and the way that music is delivered to the audience. (For example, “radio friendly music” is a term that has come to define music that translates well to radio, but it has become synonymous with a style of music set at a comfortable bpm (beats per minute), a four-chord progression, easy lyrics, etc. Therefore, the method of distribution has directly influenced the sound of the music.)

“K-pop,” then, becomes an even more difficult term to define. While the “pop” suggests an industry, the meaning of the “K” has also been contested. Ultimately, the “K” represents the presence of some aspect of Korean culture — this might not always be directly in the music, but can exist through various cues of the music, including the Korean language (which is most often used, but not always), style of music production, style of distribution, and style of performance. Essentially, these are elements that are often used to describe industries rather than genres. While K-pop music does have actual musical elements that make it distinctly Korean, such as how melodies are constructed (for example, the use of fourth intervals appear to be more common in K-pop than in Western music, possibly derived from East Asia’s use of pentatonic scales), most of K-pop does not explicitly present itself as Korean in the “traditional” sense. What K-pop does represent, however, is a modern idea of Korea. It’s an amalgamation of various cultures and styles of music that are brought into a framework that is Korean. In other words, one can attribute the “Korean” characteristics of K-pop to be rooted in emotion, style, performance, and distribution rather than sound that is constructed from predominantly Western culture (particularly that of Black music in America). This sort of approach to music develops out of Korea’s desire to establish a global presence in culture, but that desire was partially influenced by Korea’s own tumultuous history of oppression.

Therefore, K-pop evolved as an industry aimed at global influence but also rooted in the idea of a new, modern Korean identity. The difficulty with defining K-pop, however, arises with the fact that K-pop never had a consistent sound. Early on, Seo Taiji and Boys presented a heavy hip-hop sound in K-pop. Then, K-pop transitioned to pop. Now, it has encompassed almost every genre from R&B to reggaeton to rock. While it is possible to define and contextualize K-pop in industry terms, it is almost impossible to associate a particular sound to it in genre terms. Therefore, K-pop can be best regarded as an industry, not a genre.

**CHOI, STEPHANIE, PH.D.**

Unlike the term *J-pop*, the term *K-pop* was not coined by the domestic industry but was first used and widely circulated by the international media and fans.

In this case, K-pop is an othered imagination created by outsiders. However, if we think of K-pop as a culture that includes the fandom rather than a type of music production, the identification process becomes more complicated.

**LEE, JEEHENG, PH.D.**

In most Korean academic articles, K-pop is defined as Korean idol pop music that emerged in the late 1990s.

Korean pop music other than idol music is called “Gayo,” in general — even though there are more sophisticated and detailed sub-genres within it.

Meanwhile, the articles also define K-pop as 1) “a fictitious concept that aims to become a transnational popular music and in this process ‘K’ transformed into a brand name for exporting goods” (Lee, 2016) and 2) state that “K-pop, or Korean idol pop, was the first time in the history of Korean pop music to be a genre of music that was planned/produced for the world market, while the first case that was being given their identity from outside, not inside” (Kim, 2017).

**SAEJI, CEDARBOUGH, PH.D.**

K-pop is not a genre of music. It's simply popular music from Korea.

The term itself was coined by Koreans because people were classifying Korean music as *J-pop* in online spaces (such as iTunes), and Koreans were, understandably, upset. Koreans use the term *K-pop* pretty loosely. It's most often a synonym for *daejung gayo*. But because it is a term that is conscious of the international eye, some people use it in a way that is closer to how I use the term “idol pop.”

What is not K-pop? Music that no one is listening to. What is not idol pop? Music that is not made under the idol business model. Therefore, Jay Park from 2PM was an idol but is not an idol now. Whether his music is popular or not, it's not idol pop. Hyori is getting older; she has a self-driven career and does not circulate as a commodity as idols do, so I wouldn't call her recent music idol pop. That doesn't mean it's not highly popular and successful, though.

**SANG, ELLIOT**

It's almost impossible to say since everyone's definition of the term varies. To me, the safest bet is just to break it down etymologically. K-pop is short for “Korean pop” — so that's what K-pop is.

Pop music, of course, has no real musical definition; a pop song by Billie Eilish and a pop song by Lizzo will be on two very different planes of musical stylization, but both are pop regardless. The same goes for Korean pop; anything that constitutes popular

music in Korea, whether it be a ballad by Davichi, a rap song by Zico, or an idol song by TWICE, is K-pop.

The only thing I could consider K-pop not being is music that is not pop, or is not Korean. And those two qualifiers are both very loose, as noted in the conversation. Are idol groups based in Korea but comprised of non-Korean members truly “Korean music”?

This is simply how genre works and how it's always worked. In the hip-hop world, there are still aggressive conversations about what is and what isn't hip-hop, whether it be experimental rap records by Shabazz Palaces or Death Grips, or “mumble rap” records (which itself is undefinable as a genre). There are so many variations from genre terms that the more we study them, the less useful we find them.

### SUH, RANDY

My definition of K-pop has always been “Korean Idol pop heavily influenced by Western pop music and Japanese idol subculture targeting the youth population.”

I came up with this conclusion throughout my experience as a contributing writer of *Idology* ([idology.kr](http://idology.kr)), a K-poptimistic webzine which has been covering idols and idol-like musicians since the mid-2010s.

(I add the definition of idol as requested: an idol is a form of singer very popular in South Korea. The term originated from how Japan labeled young and pretty teenage singers from the 70s and 80s following the ye-ye girls from France in the 50s, like Matsuda Seiko. Most idols are trained from a young age, groomed to be good-looking and polite public figures as objects of love and role models to the youth population. As the idol industry has been around for more than 20 years, it no longer exclusively targets teenage fans, but is broadening its audience to a wide variety of ages and generations.)

Korean pop music has been around forever, but the terminology “K-pop” has been a thing since the early 2000s. TVXQ, one of the pioneers of K-pop success in the Japanese market, was labeled as either K-pop idol or “Hallyu (Korean Wave)” idol. Both terms were used in a mixed manner, but now “Hallyu” gives more of an outdated nuance. Maybe because it's no longer just a wave? The prefix “K-” has been overused during the TVXQ-Kara-SNSD-Big Bang era, especially during the Lee administration. Because of the popularity of K-pop, the government may have thought it was a great label to put on anything to promote the country's image, e.g., K-food, K-fashion, etc.

It is inevitable that Psy has been one of the best-known Korean pop artists, but in my humble opinion, he doesn't quite fit into my definition of K-pop. He is actually quite rare in the style, and it's hard to find his peers within the Korean music scene. His debut in 1999 stunned the nation in a bizarre way, as he claimed to be a comic (엽기, which was a trendy slang for anything related to cheap internet humor and B-film aesthetic at that time) dance singer. His target audience was a bit older than the usual targets of idols, perhaps from their 20s to 30s, whereas the usual target age is from preteen to 20s. I wouldn't distinguish him to be a solid, ordinary example of K-pop. He's not an idol in the first place.

To me, K-pop doesn't include any particular genre other than one big category of Western pop music. I wouldn't say K-hip-hop partakes in K-pop although there are many such artists collaborating with each other. If K-hip-hop and K-pop were equivalent, RM's and Suga's struggle during their early years would be a myth. There is a clear segregation between those two genres, based on the “authenticity vs. commercialism” argument, just like in any other country that has an established pop music scene. The only chance that the insiders and players of K-hip-hop gladly accept the label would be under one condition — if it sells better in the West.

K-pop is more of a music scene than a genre. A scene involves the idea of locationality. (I wouldn't say nationality because the word gives a bit of an afterimage of nationalism...) EXO previously had four Chinese members; still, they were unapologetically K-pop. I find many idol groups from China or Thailand now have very similar look-and-feel with K-pop, and I agree with them being labeled as C-pop or T-pop, following the stylization of the term K-pop.

### **How does BTS fit (or not fit) into this definition of K-pop?**

#### **@ALAPADMA2**

To some extent, BTS fits into the industry definition of K-pop. There is no doubt that the way BTS operates and the way they've come to create and distribute music is all based on how the K-pop industry works.

Music consumption by the audience — streaming for YouTube views as soon as the song drops, buying music extensively during the first week, trending hashtags on Twitter to promote new music — is also all rooted in how fans of various groups from the K-pop industry consume music (however, this is also becoming common in most music industries, although it remains dominant among K-pop audiences). But there is clear tension between BTS and other groups associated with K-pop, not simply by the fans but also in style of music and performance. Something is heard and felt that has allowed for this debate, and that is largely based in BTS's music — BTS do not satisfy the idea behind what K-pop is meant to do. Today's K-pop is about escapism, distancing oneself from the present, both physically and mentally. Most K-pop videos, particularly those produced by SM, YG, and JYP (the “big three” musical production companies in South Korea), use ambiguous but glamorous settings that create an ideal landscape for the artists to perform in. These physical settings are almost entirely out of context, yet that is exactly what helps dislocate the viewer from any connection to reality. This is also reflected in the lyrics of the songs, which tend to address mostly superficial aspects of love and occasionally self-motivation, yet these lyrics hesitate to delve deeper in order to appeal to as wide an audience as possible as well as to avoid any potential censorship. This distancing helps convey the sense of idealism and perfection that K-pop strives for.

BTS, however, do not deliver the same message. Their lyrics do not shy away from speaking about dark, honest subject matter, and their music videos are often in places where context is present — these settings either allude to past MVs (such as in “Fake Love”), or they are in recognizable and/or outdoor locations (“Save Me,” “ON”). Even in MVs layered with effects (“IDOL”), the context is driven by the expression of Korean identity and the use of Korean symbols to bring back the element of realism rather than idealism. BTS, therefore, are quite at odds with what the K-pop industry (or those companies that predominantly run the K-pop industry) wants of them and wants of artists in general — it's the inherent purpose of K-pop (to help the viewer escape) that does not match the purpose of BTS (to help the viewer cope with reality). This very difference makes BTS both part of the K-pop industry as well as outliers within it.

#### **CHOI, STEPHANIE, PH.D.**

Just like other idols [*aidol* in Korean], BTS:

- comprises singers and rappers, and all members dance;
- went through the typical scouting system, training process, promotion schedules, and diet plans during their pre/debut years and has gained more



- individual agency during the latter phase of their careers;
- is supported by the in-house production team and is under the all-around management system of their entertainment company;
- performs affective labors, including fan service and related events, such as fansigns and fanmeets;
- produces concept albums with narratives about “worldview” (*seggyegwan*) that are crafted by in-house writers;
- has a fandom that conducts and participates in typical K-pop fandom practices, such as fan chants, fan events at concerts, fanfictions, fanarts, fancams, and fanmade merchandise;
- is wary of revealing their romantic relationships to their fans;
- is a multimedia entertainer, who engage in the business fields of music, dance, art, acting, fashion, cosmetics, and more;
- has fans who regard themselves as promoters of the group and actively participate in voting, streaming, and promoting through donations.

BTS does not fit into the definition of K-pop:

- if we point out that the term K-pop is generalized by the West as “manufactured, voiceless, and agency-free machines”;
- because unlike other Korean idol groups that eschew using politics as marketing strategies, BTS actively uses political themes in their production and promotes them as part of their identity.

#### LEE, JEEHENG, PH.D.

BTS is a Korean idol group, so in that respect they perfectly fit into this surface definition of K-pop.

Meanwhile, because the term K-pop has not been conceived naturally from the inside but named from the outside perspective, it intrinsically adds socio-cultural implications/prejudice in the course of development. Mostly negative, on many occasions.

So, what are the outside perspectives — mainly Western-centered views — that are implicated in the term K-pop? First, it is a culture that is all about looks and visuals. Plastic surgery, skin care, and stage makeup are basic, and male idols usually wear what some perceive as androgynous outfits.

Second, it [K-pop] is the product of excessive consumer capitalism. The facts behind this include:

They [music agencies] include different photo cards in the album to get fans to buy multiple copies of the same album to collect the photo cards. In effect, some fans buy hundreds of albums to win the fan signing event and this is accepted as a kind of fan culture.

They make fans buy the light-sticks to feel the sense of belonging.

They release countless kinds of merchandise, photo books and DVDs on a seasonal basis. Can't deny this either, because BigHit follows all these idol music industry marketing practices.

Third, they are not artists but nothing more than “scarecrows” who don't make their own music but sing and dance to the music made by the agency. They don't have autonomous rights. This impression comes from the preconception about the trainee system where the potential artists are picked up at an early age and are bound by “slave contracts.” It is partially true that slave contracts existed in the early stage of K-pop and still exist in some villain [unethical] agencies. But since the standardization

of contracts was enforced by law, this kind of slave contract is not allowed anymore. More importantly, many idols these days make their own music, especially BTS. BTS lyrics/narratives of the album are coming from their own personal growth. Messages flow organically through one album to the next album.

**SAEJI, CEDARBOUGH, PH.D.**

BTS is the textbook perfect definition of K-pop. BTS is the most popular group from Korea.

They have only Korean members, Korean management, and sing primarily in Korean. Their music and music videos are visually driven (and full of intertextuality), songs are hip-hop heavy but genre-fluid, and many are performed with fabulous, choreographed dance. These basic facts describe the core elements of contemporary idol K-pop — in fact, in some ways such as having all Korean members, they are almost more truly K-pop than some other idol groups.

The entire idea that BTS is not K-pop or trying to separate BTS from K-pop is done solely for BTS, not for the K-pop from which they emerged and which is populated with their friends and colleagues. Is the label K-pop acceptable to BTS-pop advocates when talking about TXT, Seventeen, Gfriend, and others released by BigHit? If one believes that K-pop is a negative term, does one want to “protect” these groups from that label as well? Or only TXT because that group was designed by BigHit from the start? This industry gave birth to BTS. K-pop is the social, cultural, historical context of BTS. BTS would not exist without the K-pop industry. Are they the most popular group from Korea in the USA since the Kim Sisters? Yes, they are. (And why are we giving more credence to America than Japan or Indonesia — both countries with more BTS fans than America?) Is BTS on a different level? Yes. Are they extremely special artists? Yes. But that does not mean they are not K-pop. The things that make BTS stick out, almost all of them, are also true of other Korean artists. They're not the same as BTS, because what makes BTS different is the combination of every aspect of those seven young men, their training, and their management. But the same thing could be said about every single group. No two people are the same; no two idol groups are the same. Fans often say “only BTS this” and “only BTS that” about song writing or social messages or coming from a small company, but there is greater diversity in the K-pop industry than many people know if they aren't actively following other artists. Yes, there are idol groups formed in a stereotypical attempt to uncreatively replicate the success of others, but there are also idols like IU who writes the music and lyrics for entire albums and who is one of the biggest philanthropists in Asia.

**SANG, ELLIOT**

Truthfully, artists like BTS don't fit into any genre or music category. They define their own categories because they do things that no artist does before them. Aside from the outright successes, BTS's combination of genres and thematics are very unique within K-pop. I still think they're a part of K-pop, and K-pop is a part of them, but it's only an aspect of their story — as they are only an aspect of K-pop's story, the way the Beatles are only an aspect of the story of British pop music, but remain an inescapable force.

**SUH, RANDY**

BTS most definitely fits into my definition of K-pop, but in a hybrid manner. They are idols — singing and dancing to the West-originated music, U.S. Black



music in particular; following the Japanese idol sales strategies, like fan sign meetings and photo cards; and targeting the younger generation, mostly female. I said hybrid because they definitely tried to bring more authenticity via song-writing and the use of a hip-hop image, which idols usually lack and are therefore criticized for. Their early years were a struggle between seeking the approval of authentic music listeners as an idol group that does hip-hop. For now, they are just counted as a mega-K-pop group that embraces hip-hop influence and is not considered a serious, authentic hip-hop group. And I think this is because BTS is not involved in the K-hip-hop league, like by competing in *Show Me The Money* or befriending popular hip-hop musicians. And part of the reason they do not get along with the K-hip-hop scene is: one, BTS were ostracized from their debut and found no benefit from obtaining K-hip-hop's approval anymore after they gained success; and two, K-hip-hop's notoriety in not resolving misogyny issues would damage their reputation as an idol group that is mainly loved by female fans. It is not that BTS has never been criticized for misogynistic lyrics, but the opposite: a group of fans brought their problematic lyrics to public attention in 2016, and BTS apologized for the lines from their past works. Because of this history, they are in the position not to make the same type of mistake, which encourages them to cross-check their work with Women's Studies experts when possible.

Big Bang went through a similar phase in the late 2000s and early 2010s. They were accepted as an authentic hip-hop group while maintaining their position as an idol boy band, which was quite uncommon. G-Dragon's *One of a Kind* was an especially critically acclaimed record. And I have a theory that K-hip-hop's acceptance of G-Dragon and Big Bang was because they share the language of . . . something that was inconsiderately imported from U.S. hip hop . . . which is . . . misogyny. It was not until 2016 that idol fans raised their voices about the misogyny issue (the first case was from BTS's ARMY), but Big Bang had already gotten the reputation as a trans-idol group, and, in my opinion, part of the reason was the lyrics that objectify women, which made them look like they don't comply with the female fanbase's usual standards. YG was known to be a comparatively authentic Black music label since the 90s (ITYM, Jinu Sean, etc.), and that of course helped them to gain the reputation as well. (I also do agree that their production is close to U.S. Black music, thanks to Teddy's musical genius.) YG recognized the benefit of K-hip-hop's approval of authenticity in their music, so they consistently sent their trainees or idol rappers like MINO or Bobby to the *Show Me The Money* competitions and tried to win the title of "K-hip-hop approved idol rappers." BTS chose not to go that way. They might have thought the approval of the West (which is counted to be superior to many K-hip-hop people) and ARMY was just enough for them.

## About the Discussion

**Why is the argument “BTS isn’t K-pop” being raised and who is raising it? To what degree is this argument “Western” in origin? What is the role of the media in this discussion?**

@ALAPADMA2

The argument is heavily based on who is expressing it, what music they are familiar with, and what culture they have grown up in. There is no one reason for the argument and no one source of it. However, from personal observation, it is fairly Western in origin, but there are cultural reasons for it. People in Korea don’t usually use the term “K-pop”; rather, they define this style of music as “idol music.” K-pop, as stated, is a rather ill-defined and ill-prescribed term that is used much more in the West than in Korea. This also implies a major issue of how music is discussed in general — because “pop music” implies Western pop, we’ve come to use the West as the origin for how to refer to music and add tags to describe music that is derived from the West. The same issue is seen with “music” and “world music” — “music” being anything Anglo-American, and “world music” (with the added tag of “world”) referring to anything outside of the Anglo-American cultures. Hence, K-pop implies that the source is the West, and the artists associated with it are imitators of Western pop. The argument to separate BTS from K-pop is in part due to the need to communicate that they are not “copies” of Western artists. Western BTS fans may have a stronger opinion about this due to the history of Western music and the treatment of POC music in the mainstream music industry. Throughout various eras of popular music, categories and “genres” have been created to separate certain artists from others, and while the basis of that separation lies in musical distinction, it is often also a result of race, ethnicity, and language. Categories such as R&B, “Urban,” and “Latin” have all been created to separate a particular group of people from the mainstream Western pop industry. This exposure and familiarity might influence Western BTS fans to be particularly vocal about eliminating a K-pop category, as they have seen such tactics used in the past to keep POC artists away from the mainstream.

However, part of this argument is also due to the fact that industries do change — what is regarded as K-pop today is very different from K-pop 10 years ago. According to some fans, BTS resembles more of what K-pop used to be rather than what it is now. Others would argue the opposite. Regardless, the K-pop industry has commercialized itself significantly in the past few years; hence, most large companies have streamlined their music to make it more profitable. This has, in a way, given many groups a similar sound. This isn’t exclusive to K-pop: similar trends can be seen in the American industry, the Japanese industry, and the Indian music industry. To some, BTS might not appear as K-pop today, but the debate might have been very different 10 years ago. And as mentioned, BTS remain outliers in the K-pop industry — it naturally becomes controversial when an outlier becomes the face of an entire industry.

The media certainly has a large role in this debate. There is a narrative about K-pop in the West that is quite negative — Western media has more frequently than not reported only the bad sides of K-pop, therefore communicating only this negativity to the general public. When media outlets refer to BTS as K-pop, they frequently also include paragraphs about the scandals of K-pop, despite those scandals having nothing to do with BTS. It is this unnecessary association and the generalization

that BTS cannot be recognized alone as an artist and must be referred to as “K-pop” that add fuel to the discussion. However, the issue with this is that much of the same criticism the West associates with K-pop can be applied to Hollywood or the western music industry. Yet the association with K-pop furthers the method by which the West “others” forms of entertainment that are from different countries.

**CHOI, STEPHANIE, PH.D.**

I have seen a number of fans on social media using the argument “BTS isn’t K-pop” to claim the pre-eminence of BTS.

The term K-pop itself has been treated as an othered term, and the othering process has only intensified since the West started appropriating the term to indicate the superiority of Western cultural industry. The argument “BTS isn’t K-pop” seems to be used to battle against the Western media’s projection of BTS as the Other, but ironically, differentiating BTS from K-pop reaffirms the orientalist foundation of the term K-pop. The ironic stance can be tolerated partly because of the harsh competition among the idol fandoms.

The Western media has been appropriating the term K-pop as an othered mirror to prove the superiority of the West and has set the framework of the K-pop discourse as superior vs. inferior. It is not difficult to find Western articles that focus on the “dark sides” of K-pop or that describe K-pop as a “machine,” which perpetuate the dehumanizing viewpoints about the artists in the Korean idol industry. Have we or can we ever think of provincializing American pop as “A-pop” and discussing the “dark sides” of A-pop or the “A-pop Machine”?

**LEE, JEEHENG, PH.D.**

While Korean domestic critical discourse has still maintained its disparaging view of K-pop culture as the epitome of consumer capitalism, on the other hand, there is a cultural and nationalistic view which remains content with the overseas acceptance of K-pop as part of Korean Wave. There’s a nationalist discourse that approaches pop culture as a new export commodity and an expansion of Korean cultural territory, along with the pride that its cultural products work in the world as well. This attitude has created a strange double standard where cultural disparagement and national pride coexist. The fact that Korean media doesn’t seem to have any problem with using K-pop to label BTS is understandable in this perspective. They hope that BTS’s status in Western mainstream will soon lead to the popularity of K-pop (K-culture) as a whole.

Meanwhile, overseas critical discourse on K-pop was mostly denigrated. In the West, the critical assessment on K-pop is low and full of prejudice. This negative notion of K-pop has been blocking BTS from being accepted by the Western general public. The BTS fandom that was faced with the Western pop music industry’s prejudice and had to deal with the dominant hegemony of mainstream culture has realized that in order to fight it, they had to produce their own counter-argument. One of them was the so-called “BTS-pop” discourse.

When Western media refer to BTS, they classify it as K-pop rather than just the individual artist name. For example, *The Hamilton Spectator*, an Ontario-based local newspaper, reported the sale of tickets for the BTS tour in Canada in 2018, saying, “K-pop flexes its ticket selling muscle at FirstOntario Centre.” It is strange to name the genre the artist belongs to while reporting a sold-out venue for individual artists’ solo performances. Under the article, a self-identified fan of BTS commented, “Let’s wait and see if they write ‘hip-hop shows off its selling ability’ when a famous hip-

hop singer performs next time.” In other words, it is a question of why BTS is so easily identified as K-pop just because they are unfamiliar to mainstream Western cultures while the Western, English-speaking artists are treated as individuals. It is in the same vein as not calling Drake a “Canadian hip-hop artist” or not calling Ed Sheeran a “British balladeer.” It is the media’s attitude that made BTS fandom strategically push the term “BTS-pop.”

The major reason U.S. radio doesn’t play BTS’s music and Western music awards don’t put BTS in appropriate awards categories might be that they do not sing in English. But the way Western media depicts BTS’s music and their fandom is deeply rooted in their negative preconception of K-pop. This was the reason the fandom used the tactic of pushing the BTS-pop narrative — it drove the media to focus more on BTS’s individual musicality than on the genre they are known to belong to.

### **SAEJI, CEDARBOUGH, PH.D.**

The argument that BTS isn’t K-pop is Western in origin. K-pop groups have been highly successful for TWENTY YEARS in China and Japan, and during most of that time the term K-pop was used. The only fans who seem to have suddenly decided they had the right to change a Korean name for a Korean product were the Western fans. (Then later some Korean fans were willing to follow along, but some Koreans have always sought Western approval, even to the extent of being too easily influenced by Western views).

Western fans, especially Americans, seem to be hurt by the criticism of K-pop (some deserved, some not). (Meanwhile there are entire marches and demonstrations against hallyu in Japan, and yet the Japanese fans continue to be some of the most loyal fans of K-pop and K-dramas.) They should have realized that the critics who dismissed K-pop:

- probably haven’t listened to it or made an effort to understand it;
- might have been annoyed that they didn’t even see this cultural phenomenon coming;
- make a living out of being critical, and hence their legitimacy comes from holding strong opinions that are not always favorable to artists; and
- aren’t even the target audience.

Things got worse when the VMAs made a “K-pop” category. Balkanizing K-pop outside the “top” categories in order to protect wins for Western artists made many fans (rightfully) angry. Unfortunately, what some fans interpreted from this was not that categories like K-pop and Latin are about the American music industry insulating itself from outsiders but rather that the term K-pop and calling the music K-pop was somehow bad, especially when it was a group as popular as BTS. Can’t they be both K-pop and the most popular group in the world?

The reality is that, whether you call it K-pop or BTS-pop, the people who don’t like the music or don’t like the idea of a popular boy group from Korea are still going to dismiss them or criticize them. You can’t change a term to eliminate an attitude. In English we continue to try to eliminate words with a negative connotation, but right now in America we’re being reminded again that telling people not to use certain racial slurs never eliminated systemic racism. And those were slurs — but K-pop is not a slur. Similarly, you can call it BTS-pop if you want to, but people who don’t want to give it a chance or legitimately do not like this type of music are still not going to like it.

One of the things that makes Korean celebrity different from Western celebrity is the humility and approachability of the idols. Taking one group of idols and dubbing

them BTS-pop instead of K-pop resonates with the egocentric celebrity flexing of the West more than the model of celebrity in Korea.

### SANG, ELLIOT

BTS fans, as well as the group themselves, have long struggled with K-pop — particularly with the other artists surrounding them and their fan bases at times being quite unwelcoming towards them. That's my understanding of history, anyway. Plus, journalists have often used BTS's success as some sort of anchor for the success of other K-pop groups that simply don't do what BTS does, which BTS fans perceive as unfair — they feel they only should be concerned with the success of BTS. I don't know, truthfully, if that's possible. Everything BTS does has an impact on the generations of K-pop artists to follow them, whether we like it or not.

As far as “who” is raising it, I don't know. There's a Korean article titled “Not K-pop, BTS-pop” from a while back that I remember people often citing. These conversations are happening globally among people cognizant of BTS's impact.

Given the existence of that article, it's arguably not Western. But then again, much of the argument has been hijacked by people who already have negative connotations of idol music, which they label “K-pop,” as is typical in the West — the argument then being that because BTS does not carry these negative features they see as typical of idol music, BTS are therefore not idol artists or K-pop artists. But if (1) these features are in fact not typical of idol music overall but merely negative generalizations and (2) K-pop is inclusive of more genres than merely idol music and its industry, then BTS can still be K-pop.

Because Western journalists are often hasty to generalize about K-pop and its “dark side,” often using BTS as clickbait for such negative articles, then often label BTS as K-pop with every chance they get, despite BTS's ascendance from the low glass ceiling we place on K-pop globally, the hostility of the argument is really based on the gravitational pull of the media. It's the media's fault for not educating people about K-pop, and it's the media's fault for not educating people about BTS. In fact, I think much of the “BTS are not K-pop” issue revolves around people's attempts at re-educating those who are new to BTS and K-pop — an attempt at moving around the stigmas in place because of these media tendencies.

### SUH, RANDY

From my observation, it was mostly the U.S. and European fan bases feeling the need for an explanation of “BTS isn't K-pop” to protect BTS from the media and general public's highly racist stereotype. Following is my assumption, but I feel it is mostly Western fans who are more eager to have the approval of the Western mainstream music industry. Of course BTS and BigHit would be glad to have the recognition, but not so much as to change their way of producing their music and contents. The role of the “Western” media in this is the same old white-male-capitalism dominated way, scrutinizing BTS as if they are just a fad to make their own wish a reality. I agreed with most of the points in the transcript.



## Round II : Response

### Agree or Disagree?

**Are there points raised by the participants that you strongly agree and/or disagree with? Why?**

**@ALAPADMA2**

There was a point about how claiming that BTS isn't K-pop will further the stereotype that the West perpetuates about K-pop.

However, the history of popular music in the West shows us that dismantling the "boxes" that keep POC artists separate is a more effective way of integrating musical styles/cultures into the mainstream. This helps eliminate preconceived notions and biases associated with certain music styles. For example, hip-hop was heavily stereotyped in its early days and was never expected to last beyond a few years, but as it began to make its way outside of the "other" category it was placed in, it began to spread across the globe and has since turned into one of the most popular genres in the world. There is certainly a difference in claiming that BTS is better than K-pop versus BTS is different from K-pop. The former might perpetuate the stereotype of K-pop, but the latter allows both to be understood and recognized more critically (without generalizations). It forces people to discuss elements of Korean music and culture, and it challenges the flawed Western assumption that all Korean music is K-pop.

**Are there opinions expressed that are potentially the result of misinformation?**

From my understanding, no!

**CHOI, STEPHANIE, PH.D.**

What I agree with:

*"GP and media think of kpop as this manufactured machine and that idea is constantly being reinforced by the media who only ever talks about the 'dark sides' of kpop."*

This is a gist of my arguments in the above responses. The Western media has been framing the discourse of K-pop as an issue of superiority vs. inferiority between the West and the Other.

*"The OP seemed to be taking issue with fans wanting to distance BTS from the stereotypes of the "Kpop"... but that this inadvertently implies that the stereotypes DO apply to other artists under that category...so they feel like it's perpetuating the stereotype?"*



*“Because if you try to remove that label, are you not pushing other acts more firmly into that box?”*

*“the discussion of Nicki Minaj and female rap...Like, why keep talking about her as “female rap” when she’s definitely in the same league of all the greatest rappers regardless of gender?”*

Yes, instead of joining the discourse that enhances stereotyping a certain group of artists based on their regional origin, we should point out how the framework itself is ill-conceived.

What I disagree with:

*“Because kpop isn’t a culture right?”*

A culture can emerge and develop without a local ground (e.g., fanfiction culture, global hip-hop culture, etc.). K-pop is a global culture with a group of people sharing certain cultural languages, values, practices, etc.

*“And I get people want to kind of ‘honour’ where BTS came from, but even in their beginning they were very different from what was typically ‘kpop’ at the time...”*

I am not sure as to how it was “very different.” They do have similarities with a typical K-pop group — the idea of the group was first conceived by the producer; multiple teenagers applied for the audition; the scouted ones went through traineeship and debuted as an idol group; and they had an official fan club managed by the fan management department in the company, to name a few.

**Are there opinions expressed that are potentially the result of misinformation?**

Just the two I already mentioned above.

**LEE, JEEHENG, PH.D.**

Comment from ARMY G (BRAZIL):

*“for example, the discussion of Nicki Minaj and female rap... Like, why keep talking about her as “female rap” when she’s definitely in the same league of all the greatest rappers regardless of gender?”*

*I know race/culture/gender are different debates, and you guys might or might not like Nicki Minaj as an artist, lol, but what I mean is: there’s nothing wrong with talking about her in the gender spectrum but the moment it starts to restrain her achievements then it’s just wrong*

*I think the same for BTS... I wouldn’t be mad at the K-pop label being put at them if it wasn’t an excuse to keep them inside of a box.*

I strongly agree with this comment because race/gender/nationality attached to an artist’s name is often used as a label which implies that this is not a standard.

There is none that I strongly disagree with. Because the arguments on the transcript I got are almost similar.

**Are there opinions expressed that are potentially the result of misinformation?**

No.

**SAEJI, CEDARBOUGH, PH.D.**

Honestly, BTS is amazing, but people in this transcript seem to think that BTS is unmatched.

I hope fans can remember that they don't know everything about every music in the world and probably not even every significant artist active in Korea. Stay open to the exciting discoveries of your future!

BTS had the K-pop industry behind them, and that brought them to Korea's and the world's attention. There was an entire method of reaching the public that could be tapped into, even for a group from a small, no-hit company like BigHit was in 2013. BTS and BigHit capitalized on, improved on, and leveraged the system for introducing and promoting K-pop artists. But without that system, they'd be at most a group no one has ever heard. No amount of BigHit's (former) outsider status changes the fact that BTS was able to access stages that K-pop rookies share with established artists, like SBS's *Inkigayo* and MBC's *Music Core*.

**Are there opinions expressed that are potentially the result of misinformation?**

What are these opinions based on? Casual consumption of BTS-related, K-pop-related content written primarily by non-experts, mostly in English (or maybe Korean) as well as some content in the fan's native language if that isn't English. Some of the content may have been written by Koreans, but I've read a lot of content by Koreans and non-Koreans that is based on cashing in on the BTS phenomenon (either in terms of click-through to a website or sales of books) and explicitly tries to avoid angering fans (so it is catering to fans rather than prioritizing a more complex and ultimately more accurate narrative). I see the most in-depth conversations happening in Korean (at a level of Korean most international fans can't participate in) and in academic circles that research popular music in the Korean and the non-Korean contexts. Most fans (except aca-fans like myself and most of the participants in the R3 journal) are missing out on those conversations, even though they could learn a lot.

When I read online conversations on K-pop and in this conversation as well, I see evidence of confirmation bias and cherry picking, where a single sentence by some "authority" said in the midst of a whole conversation or interview becomes "evidence." Fans curate little snippets of evidence and present them to other fans who don't do the work to uncover the many other snippets that contradict or at least weaken the presented argument. I understand that there is so much BTS content it is almost impossible to sift through all of it, but still, I wish people weren't so easily swayed by cherry picking that reinforces the opinion they already have. The huge production of discourse from and about BTS over the past seven years makes many variations in interpretation possible (including interpreting BTS as BTS-pop and not K-pop), and ultimately that's part of the fun of supporting a group as prolific and productive as BTS. But fans should be more wary of absolutism. I see some influential accounts (often completely anonymous) advocating strongly for certain interpretations and trying to cement official narratives, which they do partially through creation of block lists that can silence more nuanced discourse. We should always be willing to have our ideas challenged — it only makes us stronger and more knowledgeable.

### SANG, ELLIOT

None that I strongly disagree with or agree with. It's such a complicated conversation that I can kinda lean towards any of the points being made.

#### **Are there opinions expressed that are potentially the result of misinformation?**

Not really.

### SUH, RANDY

ARMY A: *“the OP seemed to be taking issue with fans wanting to distance BTS from the stereotypes of the “Kpop”... but that this inadvertently implies that the stereotypes DO apply to other artists under that category... so they feel like it's perpetuating the stereotype?”*

I observe the purpose of removing the label of K-pop is to protect BTS from the label of being Korean, which is a marginalized group in the U.S. or European market. I think the idea of removing the K-pop label is the fans' desire to “detour” to make BTS settle in those markets. However, the label is there not just because, but the members of BTS have Asian faces and they speak an Asian language (Korean). Removing the label in the light of media play would not remove their original identity. The racist stereotype comes from the uneducated Westerners by looking at their faces and hearing their spoken language, not exactly from the label that the media applies. So no matter how hard fans try to remove it for good, it will eventually come back in some other name, but with the same essential nature.

I also agree with ARMY A saying (although we admit the label contains a valid identity of BTS) “the label is more restrictive than liberating (in case of Nicki Minaj).” This is very true and it is true of any racial-stereotyped labels. But this restriction also makes their fans more loyal to BTS as it puts them into another underdog scenario. It is clearly a struggle, but it also bonds the fans to the artist and BigHit is probably well aware of the point as well. ARMY is willing to support BTS wanting to keep their way of making music in Korean. They clearly can decide to make songs in English if they want to, just like they have been doing to Japanese market, but they choose not to do so.

ARMY G: *“I think it's totally possible to recognize BTS's association & roots in k-pop while also recognizing that they disrupted & transcended K-pop”*

I think this is the point BTS and BigHit is aiming for. Some K-pop front runners already have tried the tactic of singing in English, etc., like Wonder Girls. But their promotion in the U.S. was not much of a success, and also a time of hardship for the very performers who were forced to learn the language in a short period of time and sing like they were native speakers. You know when people look down on you because you are not familiar enough with the language skill, something they achieved with no effort as someone grown in the culture but you did not. Of course the members have grown so much from the experience, and they became great musicians, like Sunmi or Ha:felt's discography is beyond amazing, but all of them confessed that their U.S. promotion was very painful for young individuals to handle. BTS would want to keep their sharpest weapon, the music they produce in their most comfortable language, as long as possible. The greatest opportunity that ever happened to BTS up to today is

the fact that fans around the world responded to their Korean-speaking music in the first place. I think BTS and BigHit have great hope in it.

**Are there opinions expressed that are potentially the result of misinformation?**

Most of them looked alright to me. I usually trust fans to be genuine in what they love and to inform themselves very well, sometimes much better than music critics. I mean it!

## Future Conversation

**Are there more productive modes for these types of conversations to take place? If so, where should these conversations occur?**

**@ALAPADMA2**

I personally think Twitter and other social media platforms are important places for these conversations to start. Obviously, these discussions can transcend to academic circles and turn into something more like this round table discussion (or published articles later) that thoroughly explore the topic; however, these initial conversations are important .

**From your perspective, what type of discourse, if any, do you see having the potential to achieve a positive (growth-minded) outcome regarding this topic?**

I think discourse on music in general. Much of this debate has to do with larger concepts such as what defines genres, what defines industries, and how culture influences all of these. Such discourse allows us to explore these questions. This will not only lead to a more holistic discussion about the topic, but it will allow for people to become more aware of how music from other communities is also stereotyped/generalized/defined by audiences and media.

**CHOI, STEPHANIE, PH.D.**

Whether you agree or disagree with the argument “BTS isn’t K-pop,” the premise is already grounded in the othering gaze toward K-pop. I suggest everyone to look at the given framework of the debate and problematize this othering gaze.

**From your perspective, what type of discourse, if any, do you see having the potential to achieve a positive (growth-minded) outcome regarding this topic?**

One way is to discuss how Western media, in particular, constructs the dichotomy of “superior West vs. inferior Other” and how the idea of K-pop supports this dichotomy.

**LEE, JEEHENG, PH.D.**

If I understood this question right, you are asking if there are any other types of discussion other than sharing thoughts via writing? In that case, video calls [realtime, face to face discussions] can be a candidate, but for non-native English speakers like me, it’s hard to articulate my thoughts in such an instant mode of discussion.

**From your perspective, what type of discourse, if any, do you see having the potential to achieve a positive (growth-minded) outcome regarding this topic?**

To ask what K-pop is, and to ask if BTS is K-pop or not, you shouldn’t simply look for the superficial definition of K-pop. We need to carefully observe why it was named

K-pop, who was the subject of this interpellation, and the cultural implications and influences that lurk in the term itself.

The name K-pop is a modifier referring to a particular genre of idol music in Korea, and there is a history that has been used not from the inside, but from an outside perspective. And the inside (Korea) has negotiated with the meaning in the process and accepted it as a general term. Terms like K-drama and K-cinema contain the general meaning of Korean drama and Korean cinema, but on the other hand, they are used as a means to distinguish these art forms from mainstream movies such as Hollywood cinema or American TV series. Think about this. We don't call American TV series a coded term such as "A-drama." In Korean we call American TV series *미드* (acronym of *미국드라마*, which means American TV series), and Japanese TV series as *일드* (acronym of *일본드라마*, which means Japanese TV series). Of course, it is a term that establishes Korean drama as mainstream and others as minor genres.

Pop, reggae, R&B, and hip-hop are terms that have already been given neutral meaning as musical genres. But the moment we put the "British" in front of pop, it's an adversarial term for mainstream American pop culture. When you say "Jamaican Reggae" instead of "Reggae," it is no longer a world-wide and universal genre — as long as it is not used to explain the roots of reggae — but inevitably gets the nuance of third-world, non-major genre. The use of these terms should be carefully considered from a critical point of view because from the moment the term is defined and circulated, it easily becomes a kind of official brand and cements your bias behind it.

Pushing Korean idol music into the K-pop definition seems to be a way of respecting the locality and encouraging diversity at first glance. But one should think about for whom this distinctive interpellation is necessary. Is it the Korean people/Korean music industry or is it for outsiders? We need to consider the colonial thinking that it will further enhance.

#### SAEJI, CEDARBOUGH, PH.D.

I wish I had a good answer to this question. Part of the problem is the level of knowledge of people in the conversation — after I started using Twitter I realized you can productively say the same thing again and again because there are new people listening.

However, when there are so many beginners (new to BTS fandom, new to K-pop, new to Korea, new to media analysis, new to a more transnational or global framework), this also means we have a lot of very basic conversations and very few deep conversations. To have deeper and more difficult conversations, you have to be ready for them (like the conversations in Korean by people who have a more comprehensive knowledge of Korean culture, history, and the evolution of K-pop over the years, or the conversations in academic spaces where you have to keep your tone collegial), but you can't post something on the internet publicly without people who aren't ready for that conversation also having access to it. The anonymity of the internet is also an issue — people don't always try to be kind in their responses. I think we need a new type of platform, or at least one I am not familiar with, to emerge, because right now the only comfortable way to have in-depth and critical conversations on these topics is face-to-face.

#### **From your perspective, what type of discourse, if any, do you see having the potential to achieve a positive (growth-minded) outcome regarding this topic?**

When some fans insist that BTS is not K-pop, this is disrespecting and undermining other artists that I also care about. Fans need to realize that for BTS to do as well as possible, the entire industry needs to be healthy. Instead of using fan energy to try to



drive a wedge between BTS and the rest of idol K-pop, I'd much rather see fan energy directed to supporting a healthier industry for everyone.

You know how some sports teams have one player like Messi who earns five times or ten times more than some of his teammates? BTS is like the Messi of team K-pop. Of course both Messi and BTS earned their phenomenal positions, but let's make it so that the whole team is doing well, not just the biggest star. If we do that, everyone can be lifted up. BTS fans dislike having BTS associated with scandals from other companies. However, instead of thinking only about BTS and separating their image from that of K-pop (which is impossible), those fans could help to improve the industry. Can't ARMY spare a few minutes from their BTS fandom to advocate for a healthier industry that would support all the young people with dreams — including a group that could be your future second favorite (after BTS, of course)?

Fans also need to be careful about cultural differences and not try to “fix” something that is not wrong, only different. To understand better, fans really need to study about Korea. I know that many are, but there are new fans every day, and I hope that fan culture continues to encourage new fans to become better educated instead of imposing outsider positions onto Korean artists. The Korean language, history, culture — learn all of it. Learning is an ongoing process and it can be uncomfortable or hard, but from my perspective there are huge benefits to keeping at it. Korea is constantly changing. People need to adjust their perceptions as Korea continues to change and evolve — often journalists' mistakes that frustrate fans are because journalists don't realize how much the industry has changed even in a few years. Likewise fans need to beware of reading or watching outdated information and interpretations and to keep studying.

### SANG, ELLIOT

I wish these conversations would take place in national media.

**From your perspective, what type of discourse, if any, do you see having the potential to achieve a positive (growth-minded) outcome regarding this topic?**

Essays, letters, etc. Takes that require long research and a long amount of writing are what's needed here. These subjects can't be rejiggered or solved in a paragraph or two. That's why I made my video, “BTS vs. K-Pop,” for my YouTube channel, bby gang. I wanted to finally tackle the subject in length and detail.

### SUH, RANDY

The only problem I have with Twitter is that good conversations evaporate just too quickly. I think this whole project is a great attempt to preserve some of the valuable points, by archiving and re-reading them. Sticking to Twitter is okay in my opinion, as long as someone out there is keeping a keen eye on interesting discussions and saving them to a safe place. I personally save lots of them on my personal blog to look at in the future.

**From your perspective, what type of discourse, if any, do you see having the potential to achieve a positive (growth-minded) outcome regarding this topic?**

Something like this, what R<sup>3</sup> is doing. I send my sincere applause to you!

To be honest, I feel saddened as a Korean speaking music critic because something like this has already had to be covered by Korean critics. To explain, the music criticism field in Korea is very scarce in volume and spectrum (breadth). We critics overtly label it as being “in ruins.” (We even had an exhibition on this topic in 2018). K-pop, aka idol pop, has been around for more than 20 years, but it has not been considered something



worthy of proper criticism. Same old story of rockism vs. popitism, on top of more neglect for the young-female-fan-driven music scene. Traditionally, the way people have been keeping up with this type of discourse was through music journalism and criticism, to archive thorough contemplations on music. I would say Korean society failed to maintain this, and while we were failing, K-pop just grew out of our capacity. Now I see a vast number of international fans and writers jumping into this topic and to me it feels wonderful and bittersweet at the same time. I would love to stick around and add my views to it.

## Round III : Conclusion

### References

**To provide individuals wishing to learn more with reliable sources, please list 1-3 references that you would recommend.**

#### @ALAPADMA2

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Howard, K. (2016). Michael Fuhr : Globalization and popular music in South Korea: Sounding out K-Pop. xiii, 256 pp. New York: Routledge, 2016. ISBN 978 1 138 84001 0. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 79(3), 703-704. doi:10.1017/S0041977X16000732

Lie, J. (2012). What is the K in K-pop? South Korean popular music, the culture industry, and national identity. *The Korea Observer*, 43(3), 339-363. <https://doi.org/10.29152/koiks>

#### CHOI, STEPHANIE, PH.D.

The following literature does not necessarily discuss K-pop, although it helps us to develop critical thinking. All three books point out how socially constructed concepts dominate our discursive framework:

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**LEE, JEEHENG, PH.D.**

All the articles listed below are in Korean.

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(Kim, Yoon-ha. (2017) Do you know K-pop? The birth and progress of K-pop in view of dance and idol music, *Munhak Dong-nae*, 73(4), 1-24.

**SAEJI, CEDARBOUGH, PH.D.**

To learn more about Korean hip-hop in English, Song Myoungsun’s *Han-guk Hip-hop* is good.

I usually recommend people read journal articles on K-pop instead of books because of the lag time to publication, since books get out of date pretty quickly. But there are so many excellent books that are on topics other than K-pop that would be beneficial for K-pop fans as well. I have a pinned tweet on Twitter where I recommend a ton of books on Korea. Reading a short historical overview of Korea such as Hwang Kyung-moon’s *A History of Korea* could help many fans. Reading a blog like James Turnbull’s *Grand Narrative* will help fans understand gender issues in Korea, and the blog often intersects with media cultures. There are also podcasts often made by people who have been following K-pop for a decade or longer that can be quite informative, if you’re a regular podcast listener. On Twitter, I hope everyone follows @AskAKorean because that’s one of the most informative accounts. *Ask A Korean* is also a website.

**SANG, ELLIOT**

I always recommend T.K. Park’s “K-pop is Not a Genre” and the rebuttal “Is K-pop a genre? Yes. Yes it is.” by Lizzle from *Beyond Hallyu* to demonstrate the strangely difficult and elusive parameters with which we must define K-pop. Not to toot my own horn, but I’d recommend my video (*you’re wrong about k-pop: a video essay*) as well. I don’t know of any other place in which the subject is discussed with that much length.

**SUH, RANDY**

The book I mentioned in Round 3: *K-POP SHINKANKAKU NO MEDIA (K-pop, the Media of New Sense*, Iwanami Shoten, 2018) by Dr. Seong-Min Kim. I read it in the Korean-translated version “케이팝의 작은 역사”(글항아리, 2018). He is a Korean scholar residing in Japan, and the majority of his work is to find a relation between Korean and Japanese pop culture.

I wrote a piece called “The meaning of BTS receiving Billboard Music Award” (방탄소년단 빌보드 수상의 의미 <http://idology.kr/8911>) in 2017.

One of the contributing writers of *Idology* recently published an article called “Idol History in Generations” (아이돌 세대론 <http://idology.kr/13070>). I believe this can be a helpful guidebook to quickly follow through the development of the K-pop industry. An academic journal on the BTS female fans’ campaign on their misogynistic lyrics in the year of 2016. “Korean Boy Group’s Misogyny and Division between Female Fandom” by Hyeri Ko.

## Concluding Statements

### @ALAPADMA2

In light of recent events, my closing statement is rather tangential to my response. Initially, this conversation seemed to be unique to BTS — I failed to find a similar debate relating to any other artist in the past. However, the recent death of Irrfan Khan, a beloved Indian actor, resulted in a surprisingly similar community debate that reminded me of this BTS discussion. Irrfan Khan was a Bollywood actor (Bollywood being India's most well-known film industry), yet he had done significant work in many Hollywood films as well, such as *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Life of Pi*, and *Jurassic World*. Many Western media outlets headlined Khan's death by prefacing his name with "Bollywood star." It was fascinating to see a number of comments by people criticizing that phrasing, saying that Irrfan Khan was much more than simply a "Bollywood" actor. Many people believed he should not be restricted to that tag. These people seemed to be Indian and were proud of his Indian identity, but they didn't feel that "Bollywood" did justice to his global influence.

This was an interesting situation — it suggested that culture-specific labels fail to describe any artist who transcends genres and industries. There's a natural discomfort that fans might feel when the media limits an artist to a certain label that the artist has clearly surpassed. There is no doubt that Khan has done incredible work in Bollywood, but he has done much more. There is no doubt that BTS are rooted in the K-pop industry, but they have also transcended it. BTS, therefore, are not alone in this debate — and as entertainment becomes more globalized, it is quite likely that such a debate will occur again for different artists as well.

### CHOI, STEPHANIE, PH.D.

I have discussed the issue presuming that K-pop refers to the industry and its music-related production. But K-pop can also be discussed as a phenomenon, form of activism, world, and culture.

If we think of K-pop as a cultural process that entails all of these discourses and activities outside of the Korean industry, it will lead the current conversation to another direction. To me, K-pop is a matrix that enables all of these (mis)communications, (mis) understandings, (mis)translations, and discourses.

### LEE, JEEHENG, PH.D.

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### SAEJI, CEDARBOUGH, PH.D.

Has there ever been an artistic group that did not want to say that they were more than the labels others have applied to them? Don't all of us want to escape being confined by outside expectations? There are a handful of times in the last seven years that members of BTS have mentioned being more than K-pop. None of them have denied they are part of the K-pop industry, that they emerged from it, that they

conform to many of its conventions. These statements that BTS-pop advocates hold up as evidence are simply artists saying they don't want to be boxed in or predictable. That's beautiful, and we hear this same position expressed by other artists — dancers, singers, actors, and visual artists all around the world. Although some fans have taken this as a rejection of K-pop, I see it as an appeal to be considered on their own — as artists first.

The ways that BTS fans insist that BTS is not K-pop only creates more fissures and severs lines of communication in a world in which this has become too common. The best collaborators for ARMY are fans of other K-pop idol groups, and working together will accomplish infinitely more than splitting hairs about whether or not BTS should be called K-pop. Labels come from outside, and no matter what ARMY says, outsiders will continue to label BTS as K-pop, because to them K-pop means pop music from Korea. ARMY could, therefore, apply their considerable energy to reforming the image of K-pop and to fighting against non-Korean gatekeepers who continue to fight to keep K-pop on the sidelines of the global music industry. These are both fights that they would be more likely to succeed in than convincing the world that BTS should be called BTS-pop (Gaga-pop? Bey-pop? Drake-pop? Swift-pop? Where do you stop?). In fact, recent media coverage of the BLM support by ARMY and other K-pop fans has already offered many chances to point out that K-pop is more complex and more positive than previous media coverage showed. That and similar actions, like donations for flood relief in India, have made non-fans stop and reconsider their assumptions about K-pop and K-pop fans. That is how you change the label “K-pop” — not by rejecting something you have no power to reject because you're not the journalist, academic, or cultural commentator who will continue to call BTS K-pop.

### SANG, ELLIOT

The conversation of BTS in relation to K-pop can be cumbersome, especially when the answer is generally always a “Yes, but,” if not a “Yes” outright. But K-pop fans and experts across the board have had greater conversations over the years regarding what “K-pop” even means, and using BTS as a focal point for it only adds a vital energy to the conversation.

Kang Haeryun wrote a piece for NPR this past July covering this exact issue and how it contributes not only to the otherization of Korean idols, but of any Korean musician looking to make a name for themselves — and a living. She writes of a band named Leenalchi, whose eclectic, experimental musical stylings leave them as a formidable figure in the struggling Korean indie scene. But their success comes in part due to their experience in the music industry, a quality most indie musicians don't have, and shouldn't be forced to have to succeed.

The piece delves into the ways in which Korean idol music, in part due to imposition by the South Korean government, has “monopolized” the term K-pop, leading to a far narrower path to prominence for non-idol acts. Yi Soojeong, an executive manager of an organization that holds music festivals in Korea, comments that Korean musicians “need new words to represent other music from Korea,” noting that other genres — like K-indie, K-hip-hop, etc. — simply tack the “K-” in front of existing, proliferated genre terms in similar fashion to K-pop. But this necessity for a “K-” is not only contested but lamented by professor Eujong Zhang:

“I sometimes think, why do we even need to put ‘K’-anything?” says Zhang. “We're already looking at ourselves through the lens of others. We don't say A-pop (American

pop). But the minute we say, 'Our music is K-pop,' it feels like we've restricted ourselves to a region and lowered our own stature.'"

### SUH, RANDY

Based on the transcript, it seems the "Is BTS K-pop or not" argument firstly and mostly came from the fans' sincerity to protect the group from a xenophobic Western media and general public. But I do not believe that is the best strategy, nor the right thing to do. BTS certainly does not have to become a hero and be responsible for all of the Western-originated colonialism and racial stereotypes, but intentionally separating BTS from K-pop is just a rhetorical ploy to detour the targeted racism, and also far from reality. Instead, recognizing BTS's achievements of going beyond the boundary of K-pop while they still absorb and appreciate some of the crucial aspects of K-pop would be a more interesting topic to study.

It will be also important to identify BTS's coordinates in Korean and Western music industries. I think their struggle for recognition of their authenticity plays differently in each field. In my opinion, BTS's entire career is a living example of the "authenticity vs. commercialism" debate. The intersectional complexity makes it appear to be harder to dissect, but I am hopeful that attempts like the R<sup>3</sup> project would make the problem more approachable.

## Editor's Conclusion

Dialogue should be ongoing. While our participants have entered, listened, reflected, and shared their knowledge and experiences, we don't believe this to be the end of the conversation. Defining K-Pop is a task that is historical, political, and connected to a myriad of cultural contexts and conventions. What we, as editors, hope readers will take from this is a moment to encounter, define, contextualize, unpack, and understand how terms never just exist on their own. Rather, words are part of complex systems and ideologies. These are necessary steps towards understanding how these terms circulate and impact the world. If BTS has taught us anything, it is the importance of engaging with the world and one another critically and respectfully. Our participants have modeled that throughout this conversation.

So, how do you end a conversation that isn't done yet? We thought the best way was to highlight some of the new conversations that might be started. Below, we have selected a quote from each participant that we found thought provoking and worth considering. It's up to you to keep the conversation going! If you would like to respond directly to points made by our participants, we encourage you to submit a Letter to the Editor. Or perhaps this has sparked an idea for an essay or article, in which case, please consider submitting to our Academic Articles.

**Emphasis added by the editors, not the participants:**

### CHOI, STEPHANIE, PH.D.

*"But what is "K-pop"? The term doesn't merely refer to a type of musical production but entails the outsiders' view that wishes to tie a certain group of people and production to the national identity (i.e., South Korea), which can have relational meanings to different groups of people around the world. **Those cultural meanings, however, are often appropriated by the users of the term***

**at their convenience, without fully contemplating what “Korean” means.** How come American musicians' nationality is readily neutralized in our conversation while their individualities are aptly secured? In contrast, how come Korean musicians' individualities, musical activities, and cultural values are so easily subsumed under the rubric of “Korean”? Detaching BTS from K-pop may be part of an attempt to resist against this generalization, **but instead of rescuing BTS from the K-pop box, I would suggest to problematize the box itself.**”

#### SAEJI, CEDARBOUGH, PH.D

“In fact, recent media coverage of the BLM support by ARMY and other K-pop fans has already offered many chances to point out that K-pop is more complex and more positive than previous media coverage showed. That and similar actions, like donations for flood relief in India, have made non-fans stop and reconsider their assumptions about K-pop and K-pop fans. **That is how you change the label “K-pop.”**”

#### @ALAPADMA2

“This was an interesting situation — it suggested that culture-specific labels fail to describe any artist who transcends genres and industries. There's a natural discomfort that fans might feel when the media limits an artist with a certain label that the artist has clearly surpassed. There is no doubt that Khan has done incredible work in Bollywood, but he has done much more. There is no doubt that BTS are rooted in the K-pop industry, but they have also transcended it. **BTS, therefore, are not alone in this debate — and as entertainment becomes more globalized, it is quite likely that such a debate will occur again for different artists as well.**”

#### SANG, ELLIOT

“My goal is to find truths and share them in the best ways I can. As foreign as ARMY and BTS are made out to be, the idea of a journalist reporting on the arts having particular biases and even tight-knit associations with entities in the field is certainly not foreign at all. **The best thing I can do is acknowledge my biases and continue to source whatever information I find accordingly** — as should any journalist. More than anything, however, I feel increasingly distant with the title of “journalist” and more comfortable with “writer” — I write essays, whether they be used for YouTube videos or for text-based media publications. I also conduct interviews, particularly via a podcast I've begun through bby gang.



Generally, I do what I enjoy doing – and I'm fortunate enough to enjoy doing a lot of things. **When I do those things, my main responsibility is to tell the truth, or at least a truth, and hope that whatever content I create can be eye-opening and healing.**"

#### SUH, RANDY

"Based on the transcript, it seems the "Is BTS K-pop or not" argument firstly and mostly came from the fans' sincerity to protect the group from a xenophobic Western media and general public. . . . **but intentionally separating BTS from K-pop is just a rhetorical ploy to detour the targeted racism, and also far from reality.** Instead, recognizing BTS's achievements of going beyond the boundary of K-pop while they still absorb and appreciate some of the crucial aspects of K-pop would be a more interesting topic to study."

#### LEE, JEEHENG PH.D.

"While Korean domestic critical discourse has still maintained its disparaging view of K-pop culture as the epitome of consumer capitalism, on the other hand, there is a cultural and nationalistic view which remains content with the overseas acceptance of K-pop as part of Korean Wave. There's a nationalist discourse that approaches pop culture as a new export commodity and an expansion of Korean cultural territory, along with the pride that its cultural products work in the world as well. **This attitude has created a strange double standard where cultural disparagement and national pride coexist.**"

## Biographies

#### @ALAPADMA2

@alapadma2 is a medical student in the U.S. She majored in music (with a focus in ethnomusicology) and biology, and minored in world musics and cultures. Most of her experience is in south Indian classical dance, Balinese music and dance, and taiko (Japanese drumming). She hopes to continue her studies in the field of medical ethnomusicology in the near future.

#### CHOI, STEPHANIE, PH.D.

Stephanie Choi is a recent Ethnomusicology PhD graduate from the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her dissertation "Gender, Labor, and the Commodification of Intimacy in K-pop" explores transactions of intimacy between K-pop idols and fans in digital media. Choi has interviewed more than sixty people in the K-pop world, including K-pop idols, idol managers, casting division directors, A&R directors, music video directors and staff, television

show producers, news media reporters, and most importantly, fans. Her dissertation project is sponsored by the Korea Foundation, the UC Humanities Research Institute, and UCSB's Interdisciplinary Humanities Center.

**LEE, JEEHENG, PH.D.**

Lee Jeeheng is currently teaching film at Chung-Ang University and is a member of the Film Subcommittee for the Korea Media Rating Board. She received a bachelor of science degree at the Ewha Woman's University, a master of fine arts with a focus on filmmaking at CalArts, and a PhD in film studies with a focus on film theory at the Graduate School for Art & Technology at Chung-Ang University. She was a visiting professor at the Graduate School of Cinematic Content at Dankook University, full lecturer in the multimedia department at Hannam University, and lecturer at Yonsei University. Her PhD thesis examined "Disaster and Film: The Emotional Structure of Disaster in 21st Century Film" (2015). Her research interests are posthumanism, relations between visual culture and modernity, and popular culture in new media.

**SAEJI, CEDARBOUGH, PH.D.**

CedarBough T. Saeji has a master of arts degree in Korean studies from Yonsei University, and a PhD in culture and performance from UCLA. Saeji has taught Korean studies at the University of British Columbia, Korea University, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, and is now a visiting assistant professor at Indiana University, Bloomington. Publications have appeared in edited volumes on women in traditional performing arts, Korean screen cultures, theatre in Asia, and intangible cultural heritage and journals including *Journal of Korean Studies*, *Korea Journal*, *Acta Koreana*, *Pacific Affairs*, *Asia Theatre Journal*, and *Asia Pacific Journal*.

**SANG, ELLIOT**

Elliot Sang is a journalist, essayist, and musician based in New York City. He became a fan of BTS through his journey of writing about them for publications such as DJBooth and GENMag. His YouTube channel, bby gang, presents video essays tackling subjects related to BTS and K-pop, among other topics.

**SUH, RANDY**

Randy Suh is an independent K-pop music critic and music writer. They have been writing for the Korean idol pop web magazine *Idology* ([idology.kr](http://idology.kr)) about K-pop music and the culture around it for a number of years. They are greatly interested in the boundary-blurring individuals of the scene, like pop artists pursuing authenticity or idols presenting themselves in gender nonconfirming manners. But their greatest interest will always be music itself. They recently launched a newsletter project called *Bulletproof Delivery*, covering BTS's music and other topics on them once a week. Archive blog is found at <https://bulletproof-delivery.postype.com/>.

# Appendix

## Complete Transcript

Below is a transcript of a conversation that occurred via a Twitter Group Chat between nine self-identified ARMYs from six different countries. Ages of participants spanned three generations.

All participants in the transcribed conversation have consented to having this transcript released under the condition that their identities are not disclosed. Grammatical errors have not been corrected or edited for the sake of preserving the flow of the original conversation, but edits have been made to keep the participants anonymous.

### ARMY A

Is the “BTS isn’t K-pop” mantra really just a US thing? I know it’s rampant, just hadn’t occurred to me that it was a distinctly western or American view held by ARMYs?

### ARMY B

it seems it is. [Anonymous] commented on one of my tweets when I said that BTS was not KPop . . . because in [country] Kpop is limited to fabricated idols for screaming teenage girls. So I’m totally ok to change my point of view, but the [local] media describes kpop as this description above only. I never wanted to remove or rob them of their Korean origin. But changing the point of view of media is very hard, especially when they think they are superior to your opinion.

### ARMY C

Maybe I’m gonna sound super dumb but how is not associating BTS with kpop robbing them of their cultural background? Because kpop isn’t a culture right? If they would not have debuted under a kpop label and be labelled as a kpop group but would just have been called ‘korean artists’ or ‘pop artists’ from the start, that doesn’t make them any less Korean?

Here in [country] we have the same, ARMY B. GP and media think of kpop as this manufactured machine and that idea constantly being reinforced by the media who only ever talks about the ‘dark sides’ of kpop.

When media reported about BTS coming to [city]... 😞 I can seriously not look at the comment section on facebook (and normally I can take quite a bit of hate), it’s one big ignorant racist xenophobic rant. People are ‘joking’ about us needing to go into quarantine after the concert because of the virus. And they’re saying BTS is a bad influence because they have seen documentaries about all the ‘bad’ sides of kpop... 😞

**ARMY D**

Also, a question I have about kpop and culture: Haven't there been performers who aren't Korean who do kpop?

**ARMY B**

The point given to me is that Kpop is where they come from and that this is what they do Korean pop... I had a hard time explaining what you just explained.

**ARMY C**

But no one is actually concrete about what kpop really is.. some claim it's a genre, some say an industry, some a mix of integrated content, some say it has to be korean but then there are a lot of chinese and tai idols...

**ARMY B**

I had no intention of saying that they are not korean...

**ARMY C**

I mean... is Monsta X now Kpop? They're making a full English album? The whole definition of it is weird.

**ARMY A**

I was reading through the comments under that thread... the OP seemed to be taking issue with fans wanting to distance BTS from the stereotypes of the "Kpop"... but that this inadvertently implies that the stereotypes DO apply to other artists under that category... so they feel like it's perpetuating the stereotype? If I'm reading it correctly

**ARMY C**

And I get people want to kind of 'honour' where BTS came from, but even in their beginning they were very different from what was typically 'kpop' at the time...

**ARMY B**

My issue is that the word is defined by media read by gp and even though we can scream that the sky is blue, if media has decided that the sky is purple, the rest of the world already believes it... So whatever OUR definition of Kpop is, once the word is out there how do you modify the wrong definition?

**ARMY C**

That's my question with it as well. Because if you try to remove that label, are you not pushing other acts more firmly into that box? Have you guys ever seen the interview of Eric Nam?

**ARMY B**

Exactly! It seems though that we don't have the right picture of what Kpop really is. So, I stopped the discussion asking what should be done to improve things and the answer I was given was to convince and teach the media. Could be a possibility but I dare anyone out there to teach any . . . media something

without being kicked out... they really think they have knowledge and authority on every one.

#### ARMY C

Ughh can't find the video. But Eric was very nuanced about it, which I really like. He said something along the lines of that he is hesitant to call himself a kpop idol in the US because of the stereotypes surrounding it. And the interviewer asked him if he thinks the stereotypes are true. And he responded by saying that there are definitely artists that do fit that stereotype but there are as many that don't. I really liked how he said that.

#### ARMY A

I don't have any particularly strong feelings with BTS being called KPop (in my circles, they get judged with or without the label)...But I think many fans are coming from a good spot, in that they care deeply about BTS - they want them to be seen as individuals and for their message to be heard... it comes from a protective instinct, not an entitled instinct?

#### ARMY E

I don't either. I've read a few perspectives about it, but in the end BTS refer to themselves as kpop, and that's good enough for me.

#### ARMY F

[Quoted by ARMY B] BTS is a Korean artists of course, so we should recognize their cultural and historical context when we talk about them. But the reason armys saying BTS is not KPop is the categorisation that western critics put on the label. When they talk about Drake, they don't categorize him as Canadian

#### ARMY C

Yes she explained it very well! That's exactly what happens (at least with . . . media and gp).

But how do we change that, or should we just not try to change it and let it go. Because at the moment (looking at those fb comments) that's very hard to do. BTS is so amazing, they have the most complex content I've ever seen and people just dismiss them completely (without even trying) and insult them only because of those bad stereotypes that come with that label.... And I really don't have anything against kpop, but it just sucks ..As in those stereotypes suck, not the kpop itself lol

#### ARMY G

I'm late but yeah, that's a very complicated line to draw... I think it's totally possible to recognize BTS's association & roots in k-pop while also recognizing that they disrupted & transcended K-pop (honestly, what they're doing is beyond ANY genre or industry, tbh)... but I do agree that the latter is a hard point to prove if you keep associating them to K-pop.

I do not agree with people's accusations that there's not good music or content with depth in K-pop... But I like the idea of BTS being acknowledged independently from K-pop because what BTS is doing really can't compare. We have a similar discussion in [country], with [artist and style] ...

But I think a better way to put this can be, for example, the discussion of Nicki Minaj and female rap... Like, why keep talking about her as “female rap” when she’s definitely in the same league of all the greatest rappers regardless of gender?

I know race/culture/gender are different debates, and you guys might or might not like Nicki Minaj as an artist, lol, but what I mean is: there’s nothing wrong with talking about her in the gender spectrum but the moment it starts to restrain her achievements then it’s just wrong

I think the same for BTS... I wouldn’t be mad at the K-pop label being put at them if it wasn’t an excuse to keep them inside of a box.

#### ARMY C

I’m fine with the label because after all it’s just a label, but at the moment I feel like it’s just so constricting. And not even the label itself but how the media handles the label.. making separate categories, talking about achievements as if they are made by the kpop category instead of only bts...

#### ARMY H

I really don’t think it robs them of their culture to refer to them as pop music. I mean if we wanted to get real about cultural context it’s idol music in Korea. The genre seems soooo wide and varied to me that calling it kpop is singling it out based on language alone, which seems silly. Should just be pop. Like I assume Japanese pop bands are just called idol groups. Or like the exo Chinese sub units? It seems very Western centric TO call it kpop

We’re using kpop to add connotation and categorize it before listening rather than take it as just hear it. “we” being media and gp. I might be repeating someone else - have to admit I skimmed

#### ARMY A

Nope, you didn’t repeat anyone!! Similar point to ARMY G bringing up why we feel compelled to label Niki Minaj a “female rapper” as opposed to just a “rapper”... yes she’s female... but the label is more restrictive than liberating... Removing the label is what implies equality, not keeping it?... maybe that’s a distinctly western perspective too?... I dunno, our history is entrenched with labels and stereotypes

#### ARMY H

I also don’t think BTS not objecting when kpop is used to refer to them doesn’t mean they don’t think similarly...but just that it’s too much trouble to make a stink about it and they just don’t care anymore.

#### ARMY E

Bang has emphatically said that BTS is kpop. I think part of this is a strategy to change the perception of the term. The category of rock and roll used to be looked down upon as well, esp when it was new. It was all drug users and dirty hippies and just noise, until it wasn’t.

#### ARMY I

My understanding is BTS definitely fall into the kpop idol culture. Their process of album release (historically) photocards, attending music banks & shows are



very much aligned to the kpop industry. What differs is that Bang has been angry with how that industry has been functioning & wants to transform it & bring back authenticity to it. So yes, still within the kpop idol industry.

For example: Jannabi I thought were alternative but are listed as kpop and attended the award shows & music banks.

The Black Skirts doesn't often do these things even though he is under YG and is listed as independent rock or alternative more than kpop.

Just by how BTS & BigHit function, i feel like they are very much a part of the industry aspect of kpop. What they are doing is broadening what that industry can be or should be.

It's just unfortunate that the industries' "dark side" subsumes every conversation. Personally, I want BTS to be known as Korean band and not kpop group because of the stereotypes associated with the industry. But then I think I'm disrespecting Bang's entire vision of battling these stereotypes.

I don't think they should be just called pop band, or band, & the word Korean should be present. They are extremely proud of their Korean identity and there should be no stigma. They are proud to represent the nation. The world closing off because of that word is the world's loss. I would feel the same if an Indian band becomes famous. Because it's rare, and it's a matter of pride for the nation & its people, & because of its rarity, representation matters.

Long message but I'm concluding!

However, if they do start disengaging with the way the industry functions and stop participating in industry related events (which often doesn't include any independent Korean artists), I would selfishly like that because it dissociates them from the kpop idol culture. They are beyond the idol culture. And frankly, the idol industry is trying too hard to use that kpop tag of BTS to push their bands forward.

#### ARMY C

Oh other people are talking about that discussion as well

#### ARMY I

Yeah I think the constant debate is possibly due to the variety of definitions for what is kpop. Is it a genre? Is it an industry? Is it idols culture? Or is it popular Korean music?

#### ARMY J

The problem I have with K-pop label is mainly how it's used to belittle artists and how it's a tool of xenophobia in the west. It's a super negatively charged term tbh. So I see two ways for us/our boys to deal with it - either change its meaning somehow and devoid it of negative connotations or distance ourselves from it...but rly I don't have vast knowledge about it to make very informed judgement aside from above. Recently I've watched Jino's live where he was ranting at Western academics and their take on K-pop and he categorically said bts is not kpop...

**ARMY I**

But the problem with that argument is that it furthers the xenophobia against kpop. By doing that we are just saying, yes western media, you're right, Kpop is terrible! Bang wants to do the exact opposite. Claim Korean popular music title & make changes for the better internally. Which is why I think saying BTS are not kpop is not the solution either.

**ARMY J**

Hence I really don't know... + I've put jino in my previous message to say if Koreans have some take on this whole discussion aren't we supposed to listen to them at least? Their take on this? How it's seen in korea?

**Editor's note:**

*This article was updated on March 22, 2021. The discussion of pansori was removed from the response provided by @alapadma2. The editors would also like to acknowledge the inconsistencies in romanization that were previously published in the removed sections, and would like to state that the Journal Guidelines and Style Guide have been updated to reflect that R<sup>3</sup> will adhere to the more commonly used Revised Romanization of Korean going forward for consistency.*

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