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REMOVING THE K FROM K-POP? LIMITATIONS AND POTENTIAL OF ONE OF HALLYU'S KEY SIGNIFIERS

Abstract

The term *K-pop* was coined in the 1990s to identify pop music coming from South Korea, which at that time was beginning to gain popularity in neighbouring China and Taiwan. It was only later adopted in South Korea, often with a more specific use to refer to music performed by *idols* rather than to all Korean pop music, although the boundaries of its usage remain blurred to this day. The term K-pop carries the limitation of identifying a musical genre by its country of origin, and for this reason it is often at the centre of criticism and debate. Nevertheless, with the global success of K-pop and the broader *Hallyu*, or Korean Wave, the "K" has become a kind of quality brand that South Korea uses to strengthen its international prestige, extending it to various sectors – from the now well-known K-dramas and K-beauty to newer terms such as K-food and K-technology. Today, the meaning of the K in K-pop is evolving: on the one hand, it functions as a lever of soft power; on the other, figures such as HYBE's Bang Si-Hyuk suggest that abandoning it may be necessary to overcome the limits imposed by the label and redefine K-pop's positioning in the global music market.

By examining the ambiguities inherent in the label K-pop, this paper seeks to show how they contribute to the ongoing redefinition of its positioning in the global

music market and to the complexities of South Korea's use of cultural soft power.

1. Introduction

In November 2023, in an interview given to the «Maeil Business Newspaper» (매일경제), Bang Si-Hyuk–the founder of HYBE, the entertainment company born from the unprecedented success of K-pop group BTS–provoked widespread debate among fans and cultural critics when he stated that «we must take the K out of K-pop», as «continuing as it is now [won't] help the growth of the K-pop industry»[1].

This interview was given at a time when the new collaborative project between HYBE and American record label Geffen Records was in the works: the making of a global pop group formed and trained using what Bang has in various occasions called «the K-pop methodology». This group, KATSEYE, was formed through a new type of survival show that mostly unfolded behind the scenes and partly on YouTube, culminating in a Netflix documentary released in August 2024 called *Pop Star Academy: KATSEYE* (also known as *Dream Academy*). Their debut, however, had already happened two months prior, in June 2024, with the release of a single fittingly titled *Debut*.

While KATSEYE serves as a significant example, this inquiry is not specifically focused on the group. It is noteworthy that KATSEYE is not a unicum: similar projects have emerged across the industry in the last couple of years. JYP Entertainment, another of the major entertainment companies of the K-pop industry, followed a similar path with Girlset (formerly known as VCHA), a girl group also formed through a reality show, *A2K* (short for the indicative "America to Korea"), in partnership with American record label Republic Records. SM Entertainment launched a UK-based boy band called dearALICE in partnership with Kakao, Gamma (a label founded by a former Apple executive), and the British television production company Moon&Back Media. In this landscape, there is also XG, a group whose members come from Japan but are based in South Korea and contracted under a Seoul-based subsidiary of the Japanese label Avex Trax, whose CEO is South Korean.

1 The full quote is: «사실 나는 요즘 K팝에서 K를 떼야한다는 말을 자주 한다. 이대로 가는 것이 K팝 산업의 성장에 도움이 되냐 하면 나는 아니라고 생각한다. K팝은 이제 더 넓은 시장에서 더 넓은 소비자층을 만나야 한다. 우리가 글로벌하게 보편적 가치에 접근할 수 있는 출구와 입구들을 많이 만들어야 된다고 생각한다. K팝은 지금 구조로 계속해서 가면 나는 분명 성장에 제한이 생긴다고 생각을 하고 있다» which can be translated to «Actually, these days I often say that we should take the "K" out of K-pop. I don't think continuing as it is now will help the growth of the K-pop industry. K-pop now needs to meet a broader audience in a larger global market. I believe we need to create many more entry and exit points that allow us to approach universal values on a global level. If K-pop continues with its current structure, I'm certain its growth will eventually hit a limit». (Source: <https://www.mk.co.kr/news/culture/10868702>)

These so-called "global groups" exemplify one dimension of what removing the K might entail: groups made of non-Korean members, not based in South Korea, but trained as if they were K-pop aspiring stars, and under the supervision of South Koreans. Yet the implications extend beyond nationalities, geography, or production models. To «take the K out of K-pop» also signals an internal shift within the entertainment industry in South Korea and the way K-pop groups operate lately, aimed at moving from the category of K-pop toward the broader label of pop. This paper examines what such a transformation might mean, exploring both the limitations and the potential of the K, particularly in relation to K-pop's musical identity, cultural positioning, and global market trajectory. In doing so, it situates the discussion within the broader context of how the K operates as a marker of national identity, cultural capital, and soft power, and how its redefinition may reshape the global perception of K-pop and ultimately of South Korea.

2. What does *K-pop* mean?

To better understand what removing the K might entail, it is necessary to take a step back and examine when and how the term K-pop emerged, and what it means and signifies. To the day, the term remains the subject of ongoing debate and there appears to be no general consensus regarding its definition. Some even question whether K-pop could be defined as a music genre at all.

In an interview given in September 2018 at the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles, Suga of BTS explicitly said he is «wary of defining K-pop as a genre» and that he would rather use the expression «복합적인 콘텐트»–which in the video subtitles gets translated to "integrated content" but literally means "complex" or "multi-faceted"–because «K-pop includes not just the music, but the clothes, the make-up, the choreography», resulting in «a visual and auditory content package» that he believes «sets it apart from other music genres».[2] In a more recent speech given at the APEC CEO Summit Korea 2025 held in Gyeongju, South Korea, in October, RM of BTS echoed his bandmate's words, stating that «K-pop is not just a genre of music. It is a 360° total package of music, dance, performance, visual style, storytelling, music videos, and even social media».[3]

However, these descriptions, while not wrong, do not make it less true that K-pop is a music genre; on the contrary, the characterisation given by the artists only reinforces that K-pop has a set of distinctive properties that sets it aside from other types of music – which is the dictionary definition of "music genre". The confusion

2 The full interview can be watched here: <https://youtu.be/7sqUaABmhm8?si=D1L-GRLgVVnmYc-Xo>

3 The full speech can be found here: <https://youtu.be/rTeMsiXMdrs?si=1pBhrO-d8rH2osEDe>

probably stems from the ambiguity surrounding the definition of music genre – a topic also frequently debated –, which is ultimately much broader than is often assumed. Music genres are not only "punk rock" or "hip hop", but also "religious music" and "music for children". A music genre is to be understood as a conventional category through which certain pieces of music are deliberately grouped on the basis of shared characteristics or conventions. These common traits do not have to be necessarily musical – as in the case, for example, of *reggaeton*, a type of music originating from Central America which has a distinctive rhythm and speed range – but may instead reflect shared themes or target audiences.

We can thus already establish that K-pop is indeed a genre: one defined by the importance of the visual element in all its declinations. As Giselle of the group aespa also noted in an interview with «Rolling Stone» in October 2023, in line with the words of Suga and RM of BTS, K-pop is «music you see» (보이는 음악)[4]. We could go further and identify additional shared characteristics, but first we need to address the question: who coined the term in the first place, and what exactly was it meant to refer to?

Sources are discordant as to when and where exactly the term first appeared, but they agree that it began circulating in the second half of the 1990s, alongside the term Hallyu (韓流), or Korean Wave, when boy groups and girl groups from South Korea, such as H.O.T. and S.E.S., became hugely popular in neighbouring China and Taiwan. In a paper published in 2021, renowned scholar Dal Yong-Jin, who has written extensively about Hallyu and K-pop, traces the emergence of the word Hallyu back to 1997, when it first appeared in a Taiwanese newspaper, but its consolidation as a term referring more specifically to the success of Korean singers in China to its usage in a Chinese newspaper two years later, in 1999 (Jin 2021: 4148). The same year, the Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism produced and distributed a CD to promote their local music in the Asian continent, titled «Korean Pop Music» in English, but «Hallyu – Songs from Korea» in Chinese, while Kookmin University professor Cho Hyun-jin used the term K-pop in an article for the US edition of Billboard. As K-pop journalist Tamar Herman reports (2019), in the late '90s and early '00s, Cho worked as a correspondent in South Korea for Billboard. «An article he wrote that was published in the Oct. 9, 1999 edition of the magazine titled "S. Korea To Allow Some Japanese Live Acts" was the first time the term "K-pop" appeared in Billboard». But even Cho is unsure whether he actually coined the term or someone else had used it before (Herman 2019). He does not recall hearing it somewhere else and states he took inspiration from the Korean football league name, the K League, to coin the new word, but several other sources are more inclined to affirm that "K-pop" was

4 The full interview can be watched here: <https://youtu.be/dVaCCYKkizk?si=D2Iz9o-d5VwqDKC0B>

modelled after the already existing category of "J-pop", where the J stands for Japan.

The term quickly came to denote not generically Korean pop music but a specific type of South Korean pop music, namely that performed by idols. As in the case of the aforementioned H.O.T. and S.E.S., an idol is a particular kind of artist or entertainer who has undergone years of intensive training in singing, dancing, foreign languages, and more, at an entertainment company overseeing every aspect of their career–from artist management to promotion and distribution. Typically, idols begin their careers as part of a group before eventually pivoting to solo projects or related entertainment activities such as acting or television hosting. The idol model was first introduced and developed in South Korea by Lee Soo-Man, who established SM Studio in 1989, later rebranded as SM Entertainment in 1995, the company under which H.O.T. and S.E.S. operated, and which remains today one of the most influential in the K-pop industry. Lee drew inspiration from both the Japanese idol system, as envisioned and developed from as early as the mid-1960s by Johnny Kitagawa, founder of the talent agency Johnny & Associates, which launched the career of SMAP, NEWS, KAT-TUN and many other popular Japanese pop acts, and the production model of the hugely influential American label Motown, also founded in the 1960s and home to legendary artists such as Diana Ross and Marvin Gaye. Over the past three decades, the K-pop industry has shaped itself around this model of the in-house entertainment company, rather than a record label that relies on external distributors and third-party agencies for other services, as exemplified most notably by SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and the newer entrant HYBE. This structure is undoubtedly one of the main characteristics of K-pop not only as an industry but as a music genre, for it does have an impact on how the music is made and shaped, distinguishing it from other kinds, both local and foreign.

Therefore, even on this basis alone, a clear distinction can already be drawn between K-pop and Korean pop, for not every Korean pop artist is an idol under an entertainment company nor is Korean pop music made under the same conditions. K-pop is thus a genre performed by a specific type of artist – the idol – and characterised by a particular mode of production – the training system and the all-encompassing role of entertainment companies. Nor is K-pop, and neither is Korean pop, interchangeable with Korean popular music, as popular music is a broader umbrella term encompassing all sorts of music genres with wide appeal and intended for wide audiences, such as pop, rock, hip hop, etc., and primarily used in academic contexts. Indeed, in Korean the expression is translated with *daejung eumak* (대중음악), or *daejung kayo* (대중가요), where *daejung* (대중) means 'public', 'the masses', the same word used, for example, in *daejung gyotong* (대중교통), 'public transport'.

What some may find surprising, however, is that the term K-pop has not historically been used as frequently in South Korea as it has been abroad. The Korean Music Awards (한국대중음악상), an annual ceremony that honours local musical artists from

both the mainstream and underground spheres across a wide range of genres, only introduced the categories *Best K-pop Song* and *Best K-pop Album* in 2022, despite having been running since 2004 – a period coinciding with what K-pop fans and historians would call the 2nd generation of K-pop, thus demonstrating that K-pop already existed but had not yet been fully conceptualised or institutionalised as such. Likewise, local streaming platforms such as Melon do not include K-pop among their listed genres; instead, music is divided into *domestic* and *foreign*, and further sub-categorised into genres such as "dance," "ballad," "rock," and so on. On the other hand, as evidenced by the introduction of these new award categories in 2022, it is clear that perceptions are shifting. Over the past three decades, as K-pop has gained remarkable international traction, propelled by the sustained expansion of the Korean Wave–the worldwide interest in Korean culture, media, and products–domestic audiences have, in turn, developed a clearer sense of what kind of music a self-professed K-pop fan might be listening to: namely, idol groups. Interestingly, the term K-pop became more common domestically after it had gained popularity abroad. When Koreans began using the expression, it was largely to refer to that segment of South Korean music which was being exported and was an exportable cultural product–music that had come to represent the nation on the global stage. This is where trouble began: as K-pop grew in popularity overseas, it became increasingly associated by the media with the country it comes from rather than with the music itself, which brings us to the crucial question: what are the implications of defining a music genre through its geographical origin, of coining a name with a reference to the country it comes from?

This is not a new problem. Similar processes have occurred throughout history with musical genres originating from non-Western and non-Anglophone regions. Consider, for example, the aforementioned J-pop, Latin pop, or instances in which a country or people that is not large enough, or whose culture is not widely known or is considered "lesser", have their music grouped together with other geographically and culturally distant musical styles under the broad and problematic category of *World Music*. A label which has fortunately declined in usage after being widely criticised by both artists and scholars for its reductive nature and for ultimately reinforcing the ideological supremacy of the Western musical canon. In a 1999 article written for «The New York Times», David Byrne of the influential American new wave band Talking Heads stated that the term «ghettoizes most of the world's music» (Byrne 1999).

Truth is, K-pop is often performed by artists of non-Korean origin or nationality – for instance, Lisa of BLACKPINK is Thai, Sana of TWICE is Japanese, and Jackson Wang of GOT7 is Chinese; frequently written by non-Korean producers and lyricists – for example, some of NewJeans' most popular songs were created in collaboration with Danish and Norwegian artists, such as Erika de Casier and the duo Smerz; and often sung in other languages, such as English, as in BTS's *Dynamite*, or Japanese, as with a wide range of groups and solo artists, from BoA to newer acts like ENHYPEN.

Thus, questions about categorisation persist. Where is the K of K-pop? What constitutes the Korean element of K-pop? What makes K-pop Korean? In many cases, the only apparent Korean trait is that these works are produced and distributed by companies based in South Korea. The way we interpret the K – its literal meaning and the role it plays in shaping the music, the way fans engage with it, and even the perception of South Korea–sets the stage for the question at the heart of this essay: what removing it may entail.

3. Removing the K

It has now been roughly three decades since the term K-pop entered widespread usage. Like every cultural output, the music genre K-pop has continuously changed and evolved, its shifts often described through "generations": a classification common among fans and critics alike to highlight transformations in musical styles, thematic focus, cultural trends, technologies, and market strategies. Although the exact temporal boundaries of these generations are debated, the newer groups debuting since 2023 seem to represent the fifth generation. This alone reveals an important premise: no music genre is a monolith. Genres are shaped by time, technological advancement, environments, and, in our interconnected contemporary world, also by the interplay of local and global forces. Yet despite the lack of consensus on what K-pop as a genre exactly is, the label still communicates something recognisable. Otherwise, people would not know how to call themselves K-pop fans, nor would Bang Si-Hyuk's recent provocation that «we must take the K out of K-pop» have generated such uproar. His statement appears to be rooted mainly in concerns over current market dynamics, such as slowing expansion in Southeast Asia and radio exclusion in foreign markets when music is performed in the Korean language. From his perspective, removing the K is a pragmatic strategy to secure a more stable position in the global music market. However, such a proposal exposes a worldview in which the pursuit of profit, rather than the preservation and development of cultural value, seems to take precedence. Market pressures overshadow cultural considerations, and this is precisely where many fans' discomfort lies. If K-pop becomes simply pop, flattened to adapt primarily to Western tastes and commercial expectations, then what remains of the very cultural particularities that made it compelling in the first place? In other words, what if the K is more than merely a geographical label, and instead alludes to broader aesthetic tendencies shaped by the Korean cultural context? Yet the moment we try to define what that specifically Korean cultural dimension consists of, we step into complicated territory. Speaking of "Koreanness" always leads to the risk of slipping into cultural essentialism, where culture is treated as static and fixed – which, in turn, can easily lead to stereotypes, reductionism, and even nationalist and racist narratives. Yet pretending cultural differences do not exist would flatten diversity and erase specificity. Ethnomusicologists have long

argued that cultures are not fixed essences but dynamic processes (Nettl 2005); the challenge is then to recognise the cultural specificity of K-pop without insisting that Koreanness is something immutable or isolated from external influences. As RM of BTS said in his aforementioned speech at the APEC CEO Summit Korea 2025, «K-pop is like bibimbap» – a Korean dish of rice mixed with vegetables and other ingredients: «it takes Korea's unique aesthetics, emotions, and production system» but does not turn away «from elements of Western music, like hip hop, R&B or EDM. Just like bibimbap, these parts all keep their unique identities but are mixed together to make something new, fresh, and delightful». Any discourse about removing the K must therefore confront these tensions: cultural particularity versus global integration; innovation versus continuity; capitalist market logic versus the affective investment of fans who embrace K-pop as something Korean; the industry's push for strategic adaptation versus the fear of losing the qualities that first drew audiences, both local and foreign, to K-pop. The risk is not merely losing a letter, but losing the dimension that transformed K-pop into a global cultural force – precisely because it had a different edge and represented an alternative to dominant Western pop. Within such a context, the question is not whether K-pop should evolve, but how.

3.1 Limitations of the K label

It might be argued that Bang is moved more by profit than by concerns over K-pop's cultural value when he calls for removing the K; however, on the other hand, it cannot be denied that the label carries significant limitations within itself that are worth highlighting.

First of all, the same ghettoizing effect Byrne accused the label World Music of having is at play when K-pop gets primarily identified, as the K suggests, with its country of origin – a country that is non-Western, non-white, non-anglophone – rather than with its peculiar characteristics as a music genre (Bryne 1999). In the global music market, the prefix often functions less as a celebration of its peculiar elements stemming from the Korean cultural context and more as a mechanism of segregation, insinuating that K-pop is somehow different from "real pop", which remains implicitly defined by Western, anglophone standards. The same happens, for instance, to Latin Pop, pop music hailing from South America and similarly identified with its ethnic roots. Indeed, when the category of Best K-pop was introduced at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2019, more than an opening toward the genre or a recognition of its popularity and achievements, it was regarded by many fans as a containment strategy: a way to avoid K-pop acts winning major awards like Best Album or Best Video. Rather than competing directly with other international artists, K-pop groups were confined into a separate box, left to compete among Korean acts only. Similar concerns have arisen in 2024 when Billboard changed its charting methodology, giving less leverage to digital downloads and global streaming – categories where K-pop acts usually surpass their American counterparts – and introducing specific

K-pop charts and categories at the Billboard Music Awards (BBMAs). These decisions prompted once again debate among fans and industry observers about whether they were meant to diminish K-pop's influence on the U.S. music market and push Korean artists down the main charts. While officially justified as a matter of "credibility" (Yoon 2024), because digital downloads and global streaming can be easily boosted by fans, fans questioned whether once again it was to avoid K-pop acts to top the charts and favour industry control over fan-driven success, noting that while the rule appears equitable on the surface, radio play–not to mention playola influencing radio spins–gets counted over streams, and K-pop gets little to no radio exposure in the U.S.. It appears that it is not enough to produce music with high technical skill or global appeal: the genre must navigate a world that still measures value by U.S. chart positions and award recognition. Thus, the K might hinder K-pop's climb to worldwide success.

Moreover, by segregating K-pop into its own category, the genre also gets dismissed as a lesser, bad copy of Western music. The discourse surrounding K-pop often portrays it as a foreign bootleg, inauthentic and manufactured, rather than a legitimate participant in the global musical landscape. Some critics would say K-pop has taken from already global existing music genres, appropriated them at times, and not invented anything new. Moreover, one of its markers, the idol training system, which without any doubts can be strict, grueling, and demanding, is too often reduced solely to the controversies surrounding it, such as artist mistreatment, body-shaming, sexual scandals, which, in truth, are the same issues the Western industry is also often guilty of. Little space is given to its positive aspects: its democratic foundation–i.e., the idea that talent can be nurtured–and the way it produces high-level performers, true all-rounders. Yet in the West it is framed negatively as artificial, despite clear parallels with accepted practices in fields such as ballet or high-level athletic training, because «in the West there is this deeply embedded fantasy of the rock star – a rock star acts true to their soul and everyone must accept it as part of their individuality, and only through that does good music come», as Bang Si-Hyuk put it in an interview for «Time Magazine»[5] given in 2019. But ultimately, the obsession with distinguishing "authentic" music from "manufactured" pop is fundamentally a Western anxiety. There is not even one single catch-all term in the Korean language that fully captures

5 The full quote is: «First, I believe in the West there is this deeply embedded fantasy of the rock star—a rock star acts true to their soul and everyone must accept it as part of their individuality, and only through that does good music come. But in reality, devoting a long time to honing and training music-related skills is a tactic used in many professional art worlds. Ballerinas spend a long time in isolation focused only on ballet, but you don't hear people say ballet lacks soul or isn't art. So I think it's a matter of perspective». This was in reply to the following question: «There's a common perception that in K-pop, the music is manufactured by committee, or that it's a top-down system of adults giving material to young artists. Is that accurate?». The full interview can be found here: <https://time.com/5681494/bts-bang-si-hyuk-interview/>

the English term "authentic".

Bang further justifies removing the K in terms of growth strategy. In an interview given in 2023 for Bloomberg Television[6], when asked to expand on why he had previously mentioned «K-pop is in crisis», he explained that «there has been a substantial drop in indicators in South East Asia» and that «while K-pop market share is increasing in the Japanese music market, the Japanese music market has not seen growth in the past ten years». Therefore, «even if K-pop continues to grow, from the perspective of the total accessible markets, it clearly has certain limitations». The solution, from his perspective, would then be to push for K-pop's expansion in the U.S., which seems to be «the only area where growth is possible»; in conclusion giving further reasoning behind the idea of removing the K: «There is always demand for pop music, so the moment K-pop becomes mainstream pop, it can maintain a competitive edge against local music in Southeast Asia».

This strategy, however, as already mentioned, seems to be driven primarily by market expansion rather than artistic vision. Bang's rhetoric frames K-pop's future as contingent upon global commercial domination, aligning success with shareholder growth and influence in the U.S. market. But there is no guarantee that removing or downplaying its Korean cultural grounding in favour of a vague "mainstream pop" characterisation will be successful. The more the market dictates the music, the more the genre risks losing its peculiarities which attracted fans in the first place, and turning away from the communities that built its global popularity, in the pursuit of more numerous, but likely less loyal, listeners. K-pop's soft power emerged before it conformed to the Western market, precisely because it offered an alternative to it. When K-pop began gaining recognition in the West–for example, BIGBANG winning Best Worldwide Act at the MTV Europe Music Awards in 2011 and Best Fan at the MTV TRL Awards Italy in 2012, or BTS starting to gain recognition in the U.S. from 2017 onwards–it was not when the industry bent to Western market logics; indeed, it almost came as a surprise. At the time, lyrics were in Korean, and styles in melodies, clothing, music videos were shaped to appeal mainly to the Korean and Asian audiences. And yet, the growing global community of fans were enthusiastic about it and circulating it, contributing to its international expansion and success.

If K-pop becomes a globalised pop template without its Korean specificity, the risk is producing universal sameness–and in the process, weakening the cultural magnetism that transformed a small East Asian country into one of the most influential players in the 21st century pop cultural landscape.

6 The full interview can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wAd0L-Rkts8M>

3.2 Potential of the K label

In his seminal work published in 2005, American political scientist Joseph Nye proposed a definition of a kind of power that «co-opts people rather than coerces them» (Nye 2004: 5). In opposition to *hard power*, which translates to the military and economic power a country might have, this «second face of power» (Nye 2004: 5) he calls *soft power* coincides with «the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments» (Nye 2004: X). It is configured as a form of power which «arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies» (Nye 2004: X).

This concept has been widely applied to explain the effects of Hallyu on South Korea's international leverage–a fact explicitly acknowledged on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea[7]. In this context, K-pop has become a crucial instrument of soft power, generating global interest not only in South Korean music but in the nation's culture at large. The K, which originally was attached only to K-pop and K-dramas (Korean TV series), namely the first South Korean cultural exports to gain popularity beyond national borders, has since grown into a broader cultural marker now attached to everything from "K-beauty" – to refer to Korean cosmetics products and procedures – to "K-food" and "K-literature". The prefix has come to function not just as a national signifier but also as a trademark of quality. It is immediately recognisable: products and artists carrying the K now benefit from international curiosity, commercial momentum, and even cultural legitimacy, where they were once dismissed or overlooked. In the last couple of years, K-beauty specialist stores have multiplied around the globe. In the case of K-pop, which is the focus of our research, more and more artists are proud to be called such, since its global recognition keeps on growing.

The broad application of the K – which, as argued earlier, entails the risk of ghettoisation – has, however, increasingly become an advantage in recent years. As South Korea and its culture become more widely known and appreciated, artists who are not strictly K-pop are nonetheless categorised as such and included in related playlists and media coverage simply by virtue of being Korean. While this dynamic comes with all the issues previously discussed, and may further increase confusion about the definition of K-pop as a music genre, it simultaneously facilitates the international circulation of a wider range of Korean cultural products and increases the interest for and appreciation of them. Ultimately, it enables more artists, more music genres, and "more Korea" to gain visibility abroad. In this sense, the K becomes a desirable affiliation rather than an imposed limitation. As RM of BTS stated in an interview with Spanish newspaper *El País* in March 2023: «You can get sick of Spotify calling us all K-pop, but it works. It's a premium label (Gosálvez 2023). It's

7 See here: <https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_5664/contents.do>

that guarantee of quality that our grandparents fought for», referring to how poor the country was «just 70 years ago, [when] there was nothing», and it was getting aid from the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations. «But now, the whole world is looking at Korea», he proudly affirmed. Thus, the K seems to be reframing Koreanness not as a constraint but as an asset.

Indeed, the K label, despite its blurred boundaries, signals a recognisable aesthetic philosophy, production methodology, and set of cultural traits. Even as artists innovate musically and visually, the K anchors their work within a shared framework, facilitating audience understanding and critical reception. It provides both a branding advantage and a cultural anchor, allowing fans, industry professionals, and media to navigate the global K-pop landscape with a clear reference point. Although such understandings may slightly vary, audiences are generally able to identify what K-pop is; otherwise, it would not be possible to categorise artists into generations, critically engage with Bang's statement at the centre of our inquiry, or notice when international artists draw inspiration from K-pop, which is increasingly the case. For instance, when American singer-songwriter and producer Underscores released the song *Do It* in autumn 2025, online users reacted on social media to the music and video – which features synchronised choreography – asking "what generation of K-pop this might be", and renowned music magazine «Pitchfork», in its review by Joshua Minsoo Kim, recognised that «*Do It* takes late-2000s Britney, fuses it with 2nd-generation K-pop's electro-pop maximalism, and throws in the industrial verve of Jam City's *Classical Curves*»[8]. Underscores have publicly shared their love for K-pop and cited it as an inspiration.

One might argue that the K – the Korean element of K-pop – lies primarily in an *attitude*: that of digesting, adapting, reinterpreting and remixing both Western and Asian styles (Bae 2022). As in the aforementioned quote by RM of BTS, «K-pop is like bibimbap», a mixture of pre-existing elements from which something new emerges. Although K-pop undeniably draws on foreign musical genres, it cannot be reduced to a mere imitation. Truth is, the global diffusion and dominance of music from the US, the UK and the anglophone sphere at large, which is the result of historical, economical, and political reasons, «has had a profound impact on the music traditions worldwide», as Larkey noted when investigating Austropop, or pop hailing from Austria (Larkey 1992: 151), and K-pop is no different. His analysis of how the Austrian genre developed provides a useful framework for understanding how new music traditions are born in such a landscape. He proposed «a model of diffusion and tradition-formation for popular music innovations», which consists of four phases: first, the consumption phase, in which music from abroad enters the local

8 The review can be read in full here: <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/tracks/underscores-do-it/>

market and is consumed by the audience; second, the imitation of the innovations this new music has introduced to the local audience; third, the de-anglicisation of the imported music, which consists in incorporating the innovative elements within the local tradition and taste; and last, the "re-ethnification" phase «of these styles as independent centres of creativity and innovation and the struggle for their cultural legitimacy with the 'established' traditions, resulting in socio-cultural alliances with a hierarchical, hegemonic structure» (Larkey 1992: 152-153).

In this sense, K-pop can be seen instead as a form of adaptation and resistance to the hegemony of Western music; in the words of Larkey (1992: 153), as «an effort to compete economically and culturally for 'space' and 'time' – i.e. tradition – within the hegemonic structures of the prevailing industry». In a way, K-pop is bound to incorporate foreign elements because of the power relations at play in the global music industry, and is even compelled to do so in order to be taken seriously and compete on equal footing with the industry's dominant forces.

Yet, from early on, Korean producers and idols differentiated their work from the sources that inspired it: mixing multiple genres and styles within a single track; juxtaposing sung parts with rapped sections; including dedicated dance-break segments, reflecting the centrality of choreography; and crafting songs whose very structure anticipates the integrated audio-visual experience typical of K-pop. As already noted, the visual dimension – music videos, styling, choreography, promotional imagery, etc. – has never been a mere accessory but a core pillar of the genre's identity. Unexpected harmonic shifts, abrupt key changes, and experimental song structures further contribute to this distinctiveness, often reflecting both particularities tied to the use of the Korean language and local musical aesthetic preferences. Seen in this light, the K becomes a powerful signifier of all these elements. As an online blogger noted in response to Bang's interview at the centre of this essay, «It's not just about the language the lyrics are written in that makes a song "English" or "Korean". There are musical things like song structure, ways of singing, chord choices, production choices, etc. that go into crafting a song. And these things will be different depending on the market»[9]. In their words: «Dropping the "K" from K-Pop means not only retooling the types of songs being released to appeal to a "global" (read American) ear (a direction that many, myself included, are not all that fond of, which is why we turned to K-Pop in the first place) but it also means throwing away the decades of existing branding, which includes ties to the very popular K-drama market, as well as shedding the existing market for K-Pop (aka people like me) in the hopes of pulling a larger audience from… mainstream pop fans?». Such a comment perfectly captures the uproar that followed Bang's argument.

9 The blog entry can be found here: <https://www.theidolcast.com/posts/just-pop-hold-the-k>

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, the K is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it ghettoises and limits the scope of K-pop and Korean cultural products at large. On the other hand, it has become a powerful cultural marker and premium brand, signalling a distinct aesthetic and methodological approach that is widely recognisable. Today, we witness a tension between expanding the global reach of K-pop and maintaining its identity without alienating longtime fans. The debates around groups such as the aforementioned KATSEYE[10] highlight this. As Lee Gyu-tag, professor of cultural studies at George Mason University Korea, noted when commenting on the question of "who owns K-content", posed by journalist Ha-nee Shin in an October 2025 article for «JoongAng Daily», «overseas audiences already call the genre K-pop anyway… debates on whether [KATSEYE] should be considered Korean don't really mean much when they are already perceived as such» (Shin 2025)[11]. While the girl group has not labelled itself or their music as K-pop, global perception effectively situates them within the genre, and the majority, if not the entirety, of their fans seems to be coming from the ranks of the K-pop audience.

K-pop constitutes a paradigmatic example of a "cultural hybrid" (Burke 2009), a genre of music born from and affected by *global cultural flows*, as theorised by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. In our contemporary globalised world, people, artifacts, and ideas move across national boundaries, resulting in an ongoing restructuring of individual and collective identities (Appadurai 1990). What K-pop is, and who its main actors are, is therefore constantly reshaped. In a way analogous to Arjun Appadurai's understanding of the neighbourhood as an existing context that enables the production of local subjects, the geographical locality of K-pop initially provides a material and cultural framework within which such subjects can emerge: «[...] existing places and spaces, within a historically produced spatiotemporal neighbourhood and with a series of localised rituals, social categories, expert practitioners, and informed audiences, are required in order for new members to be made temporary or permanent local subjects». But «as these local subjects engage in the social activities of production, representation, and reproduction (as in the work of culture), they contribute, generally unwittingly, to the creation of contexts that might exceed the existing material and conceptual boundaries of the neighbourhood» (Appadurai 1996: 185), or, in our case, the boundaries of K-pop.

The tension surrounding the K extends beyond music and raises broader

10 It is worth noting the group is composed almost entirely of non-Korean members except for one.

11 The full article can be found here: <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2025-10-16/entertainment/movies/Who-owns-the-K-in-Kcontent-From-KPop-Demon-Hunters-to-Katseye-Western-origins-blur-the-line/2408255>

questions about South Korea's cultural output in the landscape of its growing soft power. The recent global success of Netflix's animated film *K-Pop Demon Hunters* is a fitting example. Created by Korean Canadian director Maggie Kang, co-directed with American Chris Appelhans, and produced internationally with a multinational cast, the film raises questions about who owns the K and what constitutes K-content. As Director Yun-seong Kang of *The Outlaws* fame, noted at the BCWW (BroadCast Worldwide) Conference 2025, «purely Korean works» no longer exist in today's industry landscapes, given the «many financing sources intertwined worldwide». Now is a crucial moment for Korea to consolidate its global cultural presence, redefining both Koreanness or K-ness. Rather than removing the K, it may be more fruitful to expand what the letter encompasses. In the words of Lee Gyu-tag: «Many Koreans still associate Korean-ness only with traditional elements. For Korea to further foster its cultural ecosystem, embracing contemporary Korean culture is integral going forward» (Lee 2021). The sentiment is echoed by Chae Hwi-young, as of 2025 Minister of culture, sports and tourism, who stated that «safeguarding what is rightfully Korean while also remaining open to new opportunities is the most preferable approach», stressing that «pursuing a strictly "Made in Korea" approach is not the way forward».

Returning to the main question of our investigation, that of the removal of the K from K-pop, Lee Gyu-tag (Lee 2021) voices skepticism: «If a K-pop singer debuts with a tune that sounds like the music of American singer-songwriter Charlie Puth, will he be able to stand out and survive? If he deviates from K-pop and focuses only on pop, what kinds of competitive edges can he have? […] When it comes to Jungkook [of BTS], he could make a splash because he had already branded himself as a K-pop singer, but this is not the case for other rookie singers». Bang's strategy may make sense from a business perspective, but Lee stresses: «To draw more fans, K-pop should not repeat what it already did. So, the mission for K-pop companies is to explore other distinctive Korean elements that can enthrall people». Our suggestion would be not to remove the K, but to expand its meaning carefully.

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