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**Got S(e)oul?: The Cultural Implications of Performing Blackness in
K-pop on South Korean Youth**

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Alissa Williams

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to my thesis committee, friends and family.

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Abstract

Got S(e)oul?: The Cultural Implications of Performing Blackness in K-pop on South Korean Youth

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My thesis examines the appropriation of Black culture into Korean Popular music, or K-pop, as a) a tool that is used to authenticate the performances of K-pop idols, and b) an aspect of the industry that perpetuates negative stereotypes about Black people and exacerbates the discrimination and racism that occurs in South Korean society. Drawing on literature from sociology, performance studies, gender studies, cultural studies, media studies, Black studies, and Asian Studies, I offer insight into the formation of the K-pop industry, the fundamentals of its current state, and the roles that Black music and performance play in both. I also analyze trends in the consumption of Black music within the South Korean music market between the years 1959 and 1992 using chart archives from the South Korean music platform Melon. In particular, I highlight the consistent affinity that South Korean consumers demonstrated for Black artists under the Motown record label, which I assert had significant implications for its company model being utilized as a blueprint for the infrastructure of the K-pop industry. Furthermore, I dissect

the visual components of three K-pop music videos to highlight patterns in the usage of Black cultural elements only within the context of certain themes or topics that sustain overgeneralized negative perceptions of hip hop culture. However, despite these criticisms, my thesis ultimately argues that with our society's increasing interconnectedness through the use of interactive digital platforms such as social media which make limitations in the spread of information across cultures due to geographical barriers obsolete, the K-pop industry can come to be leveraged as a tool that can shift the conversations being had on race among South Korean youth.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A HISTORY OF BLACK MUSIC PERFORMANCE

Despite K-pop's global acclaim, its ascendance to the global entertainment mainstream has also been met with criticisms regarding the genre's appropriation of Black culture. This introduction chapter will seek to outline the foundational elements of Black music performance, the roles that they play in the American hip hop genre, the ways in which the appropriation of hip hop culture by South Koreans is foundational to both the formation of the genre of K-pop and the success of its current state, and how K-pop's establishment of authenticity is dependent on performance, which further fuels the appropriation of Black performance elements and aesthetics.

Black music has a distinct set of elements that are present in all genres of Black music such as jazz, blues, and hip hop (Floyd, 1991). For example, call-and-response devices can be found throughout all of these genres of Black music, though their musical form may differ between each; in other words, the fundamental nature of the call-and-response stays the same, but its delivery does not. Although these elements are not exclusive to Black music, these components in practice are indicative of a Black music performance. In scholarship which discusses the conception of Black music performance in America, the ring shout has been collectively recognized as the first foundational act of Black performance through which all fundamental elements of Black music have been defined, therefore making the ring shout the origin from which genres of Black musical production and their respective industries have stemmed (Floyd, 1991).

The ring shout was a spiritual practice conducted during times of slavery. With its roots in African values of ancestral connection and reverence, the shout was a physical and performative display of worship in which “the circling about in a circle is the prime essential” (Gordon 1981, 447). Ring shout practices retained the same essential elements across the country, but as many other scholars such as Epstein (1977) and Courlander (1963) have noted, there were slight regional variations. The ring shout was the original mode of Black music performance which gave rise to all other forms and derivative genres (Floyd, 1991). With that being said, scholars have identified the distinct musical devices that exist in all forms of Black music, tracing them from their beginnings in the shout throughout all of its derivatives.

Key devices of the ring shout and Black music include “calls, cries, and hollers; call-and-response devices; additive rhythms and polyrhythms; heterophony, pendular thirds, blue notes, bent notes, and elisions; hums, moans, grunts, vocables, and other rhythmic-oral and parallel intervals and chords; constant repetition of rhythmic and melodic figures and phrases (from which riffs and vamps would be within collectivity; game-rivalry; hand-clapping, foot-patting, and approximations thereof; and the metronomic foundational pulse that underlies all Afro-American music (Floyd, 1991).” To reiterate, these features are not found solely in music derived from the Black diaspora, but their accumulated presence in a musical performance racialize it in such a way that it is able to be identified as a performance that is grown from the influences and practices of the ring shout, the original display of Black music.

Although the ring shout utilizes many musical devices which provide the foundation for Black music practice, the term “Call-Response” is a trope which encapsulates many of the key components of the ring shout, and therefore Black music, that were described in the previous paragraph. By means of “extension, elaboration, and refinement,” Call-Response has given rise to multiple sub tropes, such as call-and-response, instrumental imitations of vocal qualities, and monosyllabic interlocking expressions among others that are of key musical and contextual value to Black music (Floyd, 1991). Despite their linguistic similarity, Call-Response and call-and-response are distinctly different concepts that should not be used interchangeably. Call-and-response refers to the specific musical device in which the main singer who leads the melody of a song is responded to, or echoed by one or more singers; Call-Response is a musical principle which encapsulates all musical tropological devices that utilize dialogue-inducing musical rhetoric, such as the call-and-response (Floyd, 1991).

The call-and-response tool is imperative to the practice of hip hop, a consequential culture and performance style centered around the musical genre of rap which was created by members of the Black diaspora in the Bronx, New York during the 1970s. Because rap is designated as a genre of Black music, it can be inferred that all of the foundational performance components found in the ring shout are also present in rap. Prior to the recording of rap for commercial purposes, hip hop culture was very much centered around its live displays of rap battles which were led by MCs or rappers performing over a continuous beat – much like the continuous formation of a beat present in the ring shout – provided by DJs at parties or other venues in which dancing was a

major component of the setting (Kajikawa 2015, 11). Consequently, early rap performances were collaborative and fluid as expressed through the use of call-and-response tactics and lyrical routines executed by the MCs, and it was not until the commercialization of rap recordings that hip hop was transformed from an activity into an actual musical form.

An imperative component of hip hop culture, and therefore rap, is its interdependence on dance and performance. This is another example of how the music of hip hop is an extension of the ring shout, which also relied very heavily on the bodily movements of the participants to supplement the vocal performance. Similarly, hip hop's music is both representative of, and influential to hip hop dance culture; to separate the two would be to sever its origination from, and connection to, the ring shout and therefore Black music performance culture.

HIP HOP: THE LINK BETWEEN K-POP AND BLACK MUSIC PERFORMANCE

While hip hop is a culture that emerged from the interactions during live rap performances, K-pop is a genre of music that was artificially constructed for the purposes of digitalization and commercialization. Although it may seem that these two genres are foundationally dissimilar, further analysis can reveal the extent to which these two genres have become intertwined through music and the use of modern streaming platforms and digital mediums such as YouTube and social media. K-pop can be defined as Korean popular music that holds the dance performances of K-pop artists' (often referred to as idols) at its center with a view of the international gaze in mind. K-pop's content was

deliberately made to be viewed through a mediatized, international gaze. Because of the small domestic market in South Korea, a significant number of products and content need to be packaged for export if they have any hope of generating revenue that makes them comparable to a global economic power such as the US or Japan. K-pop was therefore created with the intention of fulfilling a certain form of a live experience when being viewed digitally.

The K-pop industry is manufactured with the intent for digital consumption, and idols undergo intense years-long training prior to making their debut in a K-pop group in order to prepare for their themselves for being under constant surveillance. Although a significant amount of preparation is purely dedicated to maturing the dance and vocal skills of the idol trainees, there is also a great emphasis on grooming them for being performers behind the camera. In interviews of K-pop trainees, Suk-Young Kim confirmed that a central component of idol training includes coaching young people on how to act and present themselves in front of a camera, both when executing a musical performance and when acting “normally” (S. Kim 2018, 9). This is because part of K-pop’s genre authenticity is established through the camera interactions of its stars. Because most K -pop fans exist outside of Korea, it is imperative for the industry to create a way for idols to establish some sort of relationship with their fans that can compensate for the lack of face-to-face availability. This need has resulted in the creation of reality TV shows and documentary series which follows the lives of idol groups off stage, allowing long distance fans to materialize a personality and relationship with the idols through means of digital contact. Furthermore, the K-pop industry also feeds into

almost all other forms of Korean media entertainment, with idols often going on to be film stars or reality TV personalities after their retirement from the K-pop stage. So this time investment in teaching camera etiquette to its stars goes beyond aspects of idol musical performances. Rather, it establishes digital presence as a primary determinant of success in the K-pop industry and beyond, and it expresses “how priority is given to the way performers’ bodies look on screen rather than on a live stage” (Kim 2018, 10).

While the idols themselves are conditioned to create an image for the screen, their respective songs and performances are also deliberately designed to be consumed through a technological lens. Music videos and live performances emphasize visual aesthetics as well as the music itself, so just like in the case of American hip hop, K-pop music can be interpreted as interdependent on the music’s relation to, and influence of, the performers’ physical presentation and choreography. The use of advanced graphics, camera work, and intense choreography when recording acts made for digital distribution are intended to bridge the gap between viewer and artist; because international K-pop fans very rarely have opportunities to interact in a live setting with their idols, the genre’s digital content is created in order to fulfill the visual desires of fans in the absence of these live interaction. Fashion, vocals, choreography, and visual effects are all combined to construct a new-age version of “liveness (Kim 2018, 20).”

According to performance studies scholar Phillip Auslander, liveness is a matter of perception as opposed to a physical presence of being, and “what counts culturally as live experience changes over time in relation to technological change” (Auslander, 2012). The performative components that are combined to create K-pop’s digital media content

emulate a perception of liveness to fans, establishing an “ideal” physical form in regards to the performance which corresponds to a particular song. Because the industry’s success is dependent on meeting the expectations of its fans both in a musical and performative regard, every component of a digital K-pop performance is formulated to satisfy its market demand; in other words, K-pop’s digital content is made to both generate and fulfill the demands of its consumers while also contributing to the formation of standards regarding the perception of idols in an in-person setting.

Although a perception of liveness is achieved through mediatized K-pop content, it also succeeds in creating an appetite for traditional live performances. Following the release of a new album or EP, idol groups generally go on domestic and international promotional tours. Like almost every other aspect of the industry, K-pop artists have a specific formula they follow in order to publicize their music. Prior to the release of a full music project, idols often drop “comeback trailer” videos which provide a glimpse into the theme and musical content of the upcoming album. These teasers can range from full music videos corresponding to a specific song on the upcoming album to a compilation of visual and audio snippets from multiple music videos. Either way, the essence of these “comeback trailers” is to create a demand for the artists’ music while simultaneously associating the sonic content with a visual aesthetic and performance. Therefore, it can be gleaned that the musical process of the K-pop industry is catered to establishing a distinct performative presence of the artists in relation to their music. As a result, K-pop songs are deemed substantially recognizable by their respective visual elements, especially

choreography, and vice versa. This leads to the formation of live expectations for idols regarding their traditional in-person performances.

In order to attain authenticity and reaffirm their fans that they are more than digital entities, K-pop artists perform vocally and physically during live concerts with the aim to not only uphold, but to exceed the expectations they created for themselves through the digital distribution of their content. The main appeal of attending a K-pop concert is to see the actual bodies of the idols. This excerpt by Kim encapsulates the reasoning behind this phenomena:

Since spectacular visuality, which includes good looks, a unique fashion statement, and dance moves, is at the center of the K-pop frenzy, live concert goers want to confirm whether the visual pleasure they find on the two-dimensional pixel screens still holds when their idols are present in flesh and blood.

Kim's analysis of the consumer demand for live idol performances confirms the fact that there is still a level of legitimacy established in seeing the physical movements of performers. Due to the construction of K-pop as an art form made for digital exportation, the mediatized presence of idols creates a craving for live performance as a means of ensuring that idols' expected physical presence established by their on-screen persona matches them in reality. Therefore, it can be deduced that the inherent digitalization of K-pop denotes components of physical performance as a determinant of authenticity.

Because stage aesthetics are such a crucial element in establishing idols' legitimacy in the K-pop genre, the industry's visual content creators are constantly seeking new influences in order to appeal to the global consumer market. After rap music's rise to the global mainstream in the 1990s, hip hop became an international force

that catalyzed social and cultural shifts in youth culture around the world, including in South Korea. In fact, South Korea has built arguably one of the most prominent hip hop cultural scenes outside of the US, and its origins in the country can be traced back to the origins of K-pop.

HIP HOP'S ROLE IN THE K-POP INDUSTRY

In 1992, the first K-pop group, Seo Taiji and Boys, debuted with a revolutionary sound that incorporated Korean lyrics with Western styles of rap and R&B alongside a catchy chorus (Vulture, January 15, 2019). In addition to their vocals, Seo Taiji and Boys also used elements of Black music performance and culture in their music and visual content. Specific instances of cultural appropriation and racism exhibited by Seo Taiji and Boys and other K-pop artists will be talked about in more detail in Chapter 2: Data Analysis. The success of Seo Taiji and Boys gave rise to the K-pop industry as we know it today, though it has evolved quite a bit since its initial conception.

In the industry's current state, most K-pop groups can be divided into two units: the vocal line and the rap line. The "vocal line" consists of members of a K-pop group that are designated as the main vocalists, meaning that their primary role when performing on a track is to sing their lines. The "rap line" on the other hand is made up of members whose main job is to rap during their performances. Seldom do you see idols that are right in the middle and cannot be placed into one of these two categories. This vocal and rap line model has become the baseline standard for K-pop groups. Very rarely, if at all, are there groups that fall under the K-pop genre that fail to follow this model.

What this means is that hip hop has become ingrained into K-pop as one of its fundamental components that also contributes to its differentiation from other genres seen in the global music market. Because of K-pop's absorption of hip hop, many companies and groups have turned to the appropriation of Black cultural elements that have been historically associated with hip hop in order to validate their use of the genre in their music.

There are two dimensions to this appropriation of hip hop imagery and Black culture in K-pop. Firstly, hip hop's inherent dependence on live performance creates an avenue for idols to appropriate visual elements that are exclusive to hip hop culture in order to authenticate themselves as rap performers. Hip hop music's derivation from the ring shout means that many of the performance elements and symbols that are used hold an innate proximity to Blackness. In other words, although repetitive imagery seen throughout hip hop music such as tattoos or braids — can be interpreted by an external party that has no exposure to Black culture as components that are inherent to the genre and only exist to help authenticate the performer, it is actually the Black performers who pioneered and are continuing to carry on this music that are authenticating these visual elements as symbols of the genre themselves. Secondly, hip hop's foundation in live performance also creates an opportunity for K-pop to seek out visual elements found in hip hop culture and appropriate them in order to aid in building the large stage presence that is essential to the fantasy being sold by idols. Much of an idols' reputation rides on their ability to come off as genuine and consistent performers. The appropriation of Black culture is based on its prevalence in the visual and performance aspects of hip hop, and

the assimilation of these Black cultural elements ultimately becomes yet another “tool” that can be used by idols to add to their stages and differentiate themselves from other K-pop groups.

As a result of this continuous assimilation of Black culture into Korean culture via its prevalence in mainstream entertainment, Black elements have consequently been removed from their cultural and physical context of being present on, around Black, and purely for the persona expression of Black people. This dehistoricization of Black culture is further exacerbated by the digital medium of technology through which K-pop is consumed. K-pop’s digitalization allows the industry to “appropriate productions proven successful elsewhere without paying homage to them as the ‘origin’” (S. Kim 2018, 105). As a result, the K-pop industry often manufactures a multisensory production of a Black identity (sound and physical aesthetics) in order to exploit the Black image and capitalize off of the commercialization of hip-hop music and culture.

While the digitalization of K-pop makes it difficult to pinpoint the “origin” of the artistic influences that fuel the evolution of the industry, the distinct performative nature of hip hop and its respective aesthetics make K-pop’s demonstrations of hip hop performance unable to be completely severed from their Black origins. Although K-pop companies and artists may not be explicitly acknowledging the influence that Black culture and hip hop have on the industry, they are ironically incapable of eliminating the nuances of Black music performances from idol groups’ stage presence due to the cultural elements they appropriate in order to claim authenticity in hip hop culture and as live performers. Therefore, hip hop and K-pop remain intertwined, though at the moment

the flow of culture is unidirectional, with the South Korean music industry being on the receiving end.

Although the appropriation and dehistoricization of Black performance and cultural elements in K-pop are yet another demonstration of the blatant exploitation of Black culture for commercial gain that happens all over the world, these adoptions of Blackness in K-pop — which is a prominent sector of South Korean entertainment that is central to South Korea's youth culture gaze — has the ability to create opportunities in which the younger generations can become more knowledgeable and aware of the racism that is embedded into their country's institutions, along with the socioeconomic implications that these practices hold for Black people. This newfound awareness can then catalyze a cultural shift that can divert the conversations being had on race in South Korea in a direction towards the acceptance, rather than the exploitation, of Black people. In order to better contextualize the concepts of acceptance and exploitation and their applications in the K-pop scene, I will next analyze trends in the consumption of Black music in the South Korean music market over time. I will draw a parallel between the American record company Motown and the K-pop industry in its current state in an attempt to further emphasize the role that Black music and performance played in the formation of the industry itself. This will be done by pointing out the prevalence that Motown artists and its derivatives had at the tops of South Korean music charts within my designated time period of analysis, 1959-1992. I will also aim to contextualize the specific events that signaled a shift in the South Korean population toward increasing the consumption of genres of Black music that are deemed less conservative, and how this

increased consumption potentially gave rise to the ideologies that are foundational to the practices of the K-pop industry. Lastly, I will demonstrate ways in which Blackness has been performed by K-pop artists in an attempt to extrapolate the cultural ways that South Koreans generally view expressions of Blackness and Black people, and how these views contribute to the desire and inclusion of Black cultural elements being used by idols only in certain contexts.

Chapter 2: Data Analysis

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

This chapter will analyze and identify the influence of Black music performance in Korean popular music and its respective cultural impacts. It will do this by first conducting a historical analysis of the trends that are exhibited by the South Korean music market from its conception in the 1950s all the way to the present day. It will then use these findings to cross reference the common musical elements found in the popular international and domestic music that was consumed by the Korean population between the years of 1959 and 1992, the year that the K-pop industry first began. In order to draw these comparisons, I will look at music chart data gathered through the music streaming platform Melon, Korea's number one and longest-running song performance tracking platform. The popular international songs being consumed on this platform were gathered using Melon's chart archive, which can be found on their website.

The website is completely in Korean, but my intermediate-level Korean language proficiency gave me the foundation I needed to navigate the website and extrapolate the information that I was looking for. Although it would have been ideal to view how the tastes of international music by the Korean people differed on a monthly or weekly scale throughout the years in order to better pinpoint direct influences such as specific songs or artists, the only charts that date back to the 50s or 60s are yearly compilation charts. Therefore, I must extrapolate possible influences based on data taken from these yearly compilation charts.

The popular domestic music from this same time period will then be gathered by looking at Melon's Yearly Domestic Music chart archive. In order to draw these comparisons and any possible connections between one another, I will be tracking and listening to songs that are taken from the International chart and can be designated as Black Music. This means that the song at hand belongs to either a genre that originated from the Black population, such as Blues, R&B, Hip hop, and Soul and/or it is a single that is performed by a Black artist, or a group that has a Black artist as one of its main vocalists. Specific musical elements will be identified in these songs, such as iconic lyrics or specific call back mechanisms, production techniques/sounds or ad libs. I will then attempt to identify a correlation between the elements that are consumed on the international music chart to the Korean music being produced and most highly consumed on the Domestic chart. These common threads will be pinpointed in an attempt to demonstrate the extent to which the assimilation of Black music elements have occurred in South Korea over this given period of time as a means of highlighting Black culture's role in shaping the tastes of the Korean people over time, in both music and culture. But first I will go into the process of why I chose to look at music chart data dating back to the 1960s in the first place.

K-pop, the sector of the Korean popular music industry which catalyzed Korea's commercialization of entertainment began in 1992 with the group Seo Taiji and Boys, a group described as having predominantly hip hop-style music and performances in Chapter 1. Because of the commitment that this group exhibited toward hip hop music and culture for the entire duration of their career, it can be assumed that hip hop's

influence in Korea had been permeating its society prior to Seo Taiji and Boys' debut. Therefore, I knew that I had to begin my analysis by gathering music chart data from a year that came significantly before 1992. Furthermore, it is known that much of the Black music influence in South Korea came from US GIs that would interact with the local population and thereby introduce them to Black music. However, it would be impossible to discern exactly when this exchange began to occur. So, I started from when the Yearly International Music Chart was first documented on Melon and went from there. I looked at each year's top ten from 1959 to 1992 and documented each Black artist or song classified under a Black music genre. I also make a point spotlight a few songs that were made by white artists that I feel have significant implications for Black music, Black culture, or the . Up until 1959, there was no Black music influence indicated within the top 10 of the Overseas Synthesis Chart.

MELON CHART ANALYSES, 1959 - 1992

The first example of Black music that infiltrated the Korean International chart was Ray Charles' *What I Say* in 1959. It was finalized as the 9th most popular international song of that year, and he is the only Black artist and Black genre performer seen on the chart. This is the first time a significant, country-wide Black music influence can be seen in the South Korean population. "What'd I Say" is even recognized as one of the founding songs of Soul (Financial Times, 2018). which is a genre that was previously mentioned as one that originated from the American Black Community, and therefore a song that I am designating as an example of Black music. This same song peaked at only

the 50th spot on Billboard's Yearly Hot 100 in 1959, indicating that South Korea's music taste was relatively independent of Western influence given its high position on the Melon Chart.

The year 1960 suggests poses a very interesting dynamic in regards to South Korea's consumption of Black music. Elvis Presley's R&B hit "It's Now Or Never" was the 6th most streamed international song of 1960. Elvis is infamously known for deliberately stealing from Black music culture and using his white skin to deliver it to the white market (Independent, August 16, 2017). Although it is impossible to know whether the South Korean population made this correlation between his music and other Black artists, it is nonetheless still an important example that demonstrates a consumption of Black music performance, especially because it is the first instance that can be seen as being performed by a non-Black face.

Consumption of Black music being performed by white artists can once again be seen in 1961. "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," a doo-wop track by the all-white male singing group The Tokens, sits at number nine on the international music chart. Although it is true that the Korean public was still consuming Black musical content made by white performers, there are also indications demonstrations of the population increasing their consumption of Black music and music made by Black artists. A song made by Chubby Checker, a Black-American rock and roll singer, called "Let's Twist Again," holds the fifth place spot on the International Chart in 1961 in South Korea. Rock and roll is technically not a Black genre, but it is a style that was inspired by combining elements of various Black genres such as gospel, jazz and rhythm and blues. However, because the

person performing the song is Black, I am designating “Let’s Twist Again” as an example of Black music. Ben E. King’s “Stand By Me” was recorded as the deemed the third most streamed international song of the year. Therefore, 1961 and is the first year that time a Black artist can be is seen in a Melon Yearly International Music Chart’s top 3. This increase in both the amount of Black music being consumed and the number of Black artists performing this Black music showcases a general preference for consuming and being exposed to Black music in a culturally accurate context.

For the first time in history, a song from a Black genre performed by a Black artist held the number one spot on the International music chart in 1962. Ray Charles’ R&B and Country Soul hit “I Can’t Stop Loving You” was the most listened to international song in Korea for 1962. R&B is yet another genre that originated in the Black community, and Country Soul has a strong influence from the sounds of Black gospel choirs found in the southern US (Hughes, 2015). The original version of this song, a country track recorded by Don Gibson in 1957 on December 30th, is not seen on the 1957, 1958, or 1962 chart. This suggests that the Korean general public had acquired a preference for a Black sound performed and Black performer over its original musical origin.

1963 was a unique year that had no Black artists or music included within the top 10 on the Melon chart. All songs were classified as country, folk, or pop songs, which are all genres that have no direct roots in the Black community, in addition to being performed by only non-Black artists. As a result, 1963 is a year that I will consider as

having no significant Black musical influence of any form being displayed on the International music chart.

The only Black music that can be seen on the 1964 International music chart is the R&B song “Last Kiss” performed by J. Frank Wilson and the Cavaliers, which appeared at number 10 on the list. Although all members of J. Frank Wilson and the Cavaliers are white, the song’s classification as being R&B qualifies it as Black music. It is important to note that this is yet another example of the Korean public consuming a high amount of Black music content made by non-Black performers. Slots 1-9 were held by songs that had both white performers and non-Black music genre classifications. To carry on this trend, 1965 also only included one example of Black music. Otis Redding’s soul single “I’ve Been Loving You Too Long” claimed the number 5 spot on the year-end chart.

Although the years 1966-1969 show no significant consumption of Black music, I think that it is important to highlight that as we continue to analyze the Melon chart over time, the presence of Black music genres on the Korean chart will tend to be accompanied by a Black presence. This means that over time, the Korean public would come to develop and maintain a general affinity for consuming Black music content that is made by Black performers.

Following the three-year hiatus, Black music returned to the tops of the Melon chart in 1972. Black-American pop and reggae singer Johnny Nash’s song “I Can See Clearly Now,” is at number 10 on the chart. The song itself is designated solely as a reggae track, which is a genre of music that originated in Jamaica in the late 1960s.

Because a majority of the Jamaican population is of African descent and the genre itself was derived from other Black music genres such as R&B, jazz, and soul, I am going to classify reggae as a Black music genre. In addition to Johnny Nash, this year also foreshadows the upcoming consistency in Black music that will be included on the Melon International chart due to the emergence and rise of Motown with Michael Jackson's pop and soul single "Ben" sitting at the number 7 spot.

1973 is a year in which there is a significant increase in the amount of Black music that is being consumed by the Korean population. The number 10 song on the International year-end chart is "Midnight Train to Georgia," a soul track sung by the all-Black vocal group Gladys Knight & the Pips that was signed under Motown Records. At number 9 is Roberta Frack's "Killing Me Softly With His Song." The 1972 version of this same song sung by white pop, soft rock, and folk rock artist Lori Lieberman failed to make it onto either the American Billboard or the Melon charts, which can be considered yet another indication that the Korean population had started to establish an affinity for Black music and performers over their white counterparts as time went on. The last residue of Black music that can be seen on the 1973 South Korean International music chart is "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree" by Tony Orlando & Dawn. This song was the third most popular international song of the year, and two out of the three members of Tony Orlando & Dawn were Black women.

Although there are not very many spots taken on the 1974 International list that are held by Black genres or artists, those that do show themselves on this list demonstrate a very high ranking. The number three spot is held by "When Will I See You Again," a

R&B and Soul song performed by the all-Black American female vocal group The Three Degrees. Lastly, the number two spot for this year belongs to “Kung Fu Fighting,” which was sung by the Jamaican disco artist Carl Douglas. Although disco is not considered a genre with Black origins, it is associated with the “urban” nightlife scene. The term “urban” has been criticized throughout history as a term that implies derogatory views of Black people and culture, but is nuanced enough that it cannot be deemed as actually being a racial slur (The Guardian, August 14, 2018). Therefore, it is possible that the disco genre itself can be considered as having origins in Blackness, and therefore Black music performance. But for the sake of this argument, I will consider this song as being a demonstration of Black music performance simply because it is performed by a Black artist.

The years 1975 and 1976 hold no Black genres or artists in their top ten. A majority of the artists included on these charts are repeat market favorites, such as ABBA, The Beatles and Elton John who can all be seen in at least one of the top 10 slots on the International list more than once within the past four years. This streak is broken by Donna Summer’s “I Feel Love” in 1977, a Disco track that reached the number three spot on the chart. Because Donna Summer was a Black American R&B, Soul, and Disco singer, I am still designating this song as an example of Black music topping the Korean International chart.

Although there is only one song in 1978 classified under a Black-originated genre and performed by Black artist, it holds the number one spot on the chart. The soul track “Three Times a Lady” by the all-Black, all-male trio group under the Motown record

label, the Commodores. It is important to highlight the consistency that Motown artists have shown — and will continue to show — in infiltrating the Melon top 10. Motown will come to play a pivotal role in the development of K-pop because it was their business model that was be used as a blueprint to construct the entire industry. Now looking back at these occurrences, the fact that Motown artists are seen repeatedly on the charts establishes this as a period in which Black artists and culture first began to form a stronghold in the Korean mainstream. Furthermore, this year marks the beginning of a slow-rising trend where both the number of Black artists and Black genres begins to generally increase, as do the positions that are held by these songs within the top 10.

The top three most streamed International songs in South Korea in 1979 were all made by Black artists. Number three was the Donna Summer pop track “Hot Stuff.” Black American Disco and R&B artist Anita Ward took the number two spot with her hit electronic track “Ring My Bell.” Finally, “YMCA” by Village People took the number one spot of the year. Village People is an American Disco group consisting of six members. Although not all members of this group are Black and disco is not an explicitly Black originated genre, I will classify this song as falling under the umbrella term of “Black music” because the lead singer of the group and therefore main performer of the song was Victor Willis, a Black American singer, songwriter and actor. This year poses another rather interesting dynamic; all songs in the top three are Black artists, but they are not performing within Black genres. This finding may begin to suggest that the tastes of Korean people had begun to shift toward the acceptance, and even sometimes the preference of, Black performers in music, regardless of the genre that they fall under.

1980 once again demonstrates another year with a complete absence of Black music, but the quick return of a Black artist to the number one spot on the chart in 1981 suggests that a significant Black presence had remained on the Korean International music scene. Lionel Richie's R&B hit "Endless Love," yet another track released under Motown records, was the most listened to International song of the year. Lionel Richie is a Black American singer, songwriter, composer, multi-instrumentalist record producer, actor and former member of the Commodores, the trio that held the number one spot on South Korea's International music chart in 1978 for their song "Three Times a Lady." The third most consumed overseas song for the year was Kool & Gang's "Celebration," a Post-Disco anthem that also managed to reach the number one spot on the US *Billboard* Hot 100 in this same year. Kool & Gang was a R&B and pop band that consisted of 6 founding members, all of whom were Black. Although the group had undergone some changes in size and membership throughout their about two-decade-long career, they had "run the gamut of Black music styles, from hard-edged, James Brown like funk to disco brown-eyed pop (Rolling Stone, 1984)." The fact that artists who used their music as mediums of expressing and establishing a proximity to their Blackness, such as Lionel Richie and Kool & Gang, have provided undeniable evidence for the fact that the Korean general public was regularly consuming Blackness in its genuine form: from performances given by Black, overseas artists. Furthermore, when Blackness was being consumed, the high positioning of these songs on the Korean international music chart goes to show that it was occurring at high levels.

The year 1983 contains a noteworthy occurrence. The International chart for this year includes the song “Puttin’ on the Ritz” by Taco in its top ten, which is infamously known for its depictions of Blackface and degrading language towards Black people. The original lyrics were written by Irving Berlin in the late 1920s, and it became popular after being featured in the film with the same name in 1930. Its popularity was rekindled once again by the version released by Taco in 1982. Taco’s song was released with a music video, whose imagery has multiple demonstrations of blackface. The song holds the number five spot on the Melon overseas synthesis chart. Although there was an alternative cut version of this same music video released in 1983 which removes many of the blackface figures, some still remain, even in this revised version. It is unclear as to whether the Korean general public understood the racially charged context behind these depictions of Blackface, or even the racially derogatory slang terms in the lyrics themselves. However, it is a fact that colorism runs rampant throughout South Korea, even within the Korean population, and it has for a very long time (H. Kim, 2016). Therefore, although the Korean population may not have had access to the information that could have explicitly outlined these racially insensitive references, it would be completely inappropriate to advocate for the Korean population’s innocence considering the historical and ongoing battle South Koreans demonstrate with colorism and cultural appropriation. Although it is disappointing to see that the Korean population partook in this consumption of racially insensitive music that exemplifies racism, they of course were not the only country to do so. “Puttin’ On the Ritz” was made by an American artist after all, and it reached number four on the US *Billboard* Hot 100 chart. And it achieved

this feat despite Americans' clear proximity to, and historical knowledge of, racial relations in the United States. The song also performed well on the year-end charts in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa's main singles-charting platforms. Therefore, the inclusion of this song on all of these charts suggests that multiple countries across the globe, including South Korea, have voluntarily consumed entertainment content which aimed to degrade Black people. Although the inclusion of this song in the Melon chart top 10 can simply reflect a time period in which racial insensitivity ran unchecked on a global scale, it is irrefutable that this material was being consumed by the South Korean public on a mass scale, and therefore internalized by the general public in some way. Therefore, this occurrence can be considered an instance seen in which the South Korean population participated in and therefore advocated for the oppression of Black people within their own society, even if it was unintentional.

In this same year, Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" sits at the number six spot on the chart, which once again speaks to the significance that Motown held in Korean music culture because Jackson's solo career had stemmed from his time in the Motown-signed Jackson 5. Another interesting point to note is the song "Africa," which is at number ten on the 1983 chart. Although the song seems like an innocent soft rock anthem, it is yet another example of South Koreans consuming music made by non-Black faces that are using their music to projecting their own interpretations of Black populations for monetary gain. This song was written and performed by Daid Paich, the keyboardist and main songwriter in the all-white rock band Toto that recorded the song "Africa." According to Paich, this is how the idea for the lyrics came about:

“At the beginning of the 80’s I watched a late night doc about the terrible death and suffering of the people in Africa. It moved and appalled me and the pictures just wouldn’t leave my head. I tried to imagine how I’d feel about it if I was there.”

This backstory suggests that much like “Puttin’ on the Ritz,” this song was deliberately created in order to capitalize off of the suffering of Black men and women based on the interpretations of these populations (though Taco and Toto have drastically different approaches, they are still interpretations nonetheless) through the eyes of white men. This serves as another example of the Korean population consuming racially suggestive entertainment, thereby adding another dimension to the South Korean population’s musical history. Occurrences such as these show that South Koreans were consuming music with contextual knowledge of, and direct exposure to racist depictions and harmful generalized interpretations of Black people. Therefore, it is possible that these occurrences inspired many of the ideologies that encouraged the assimilation of Black culture into Korean society while simultaneously perpetuating harmful views about Black people.

The years 1984 and 1985 continue to attest to the imprint that Motown and its artists had made on Korean society. At number 3 on the 1984 international music chart is Lionel Richie’s R&B, pop, and soft rock track “Hello.” A former member of Motown’s Commodores, Richie’s repeated high placement on the Melon chart showcases his ability to continue to captivate a Korean audience with his music even after he had gone solo. Even though Richie had left the Commodores, he was still an artist signed under Motown. This means that he was still at least somewhat held accountable for meeting the company’s keen performance standards, which will be discussed in more detail later on in

this chapter. And so it can be argued that the requirements he had been expected to meet while still under the Motown label had contributed, even indirectly, to his success as an independent artist.

In that same year, Stevie Wonder, a Black artist and musician that was also at the time signed under Motown records, held the number one spot on the international chart for his pop and R&B song “I Just Called To Say I Love You.” Alongside Stevie Wonder and Lionel Richie in 1984 was Tina Turner’s “What’s Love Got To Do With It,” which . Although Turner is not an affiliate of Motown, her high performance on the chart is still significant in that she is both a Black woman and an artist in the Black genre R&B. Lionel Richie makes an appearance on the Melon chart once again in 1985 with his R&B and soul single “Say You, Say Me,” which reached the number nine slot on the charts. Richie is also accompanied on the 1985 chart by Black female artists Sade and Whitney Houston in 1985, who held the fourth and sixth placements in the top ten respectively.

In 1988, the English reggae-pop fusion band UB40, which included both Black and white members, had the most popular of the year. The song titled “Red Red Wine” was originally released in 1967 as a pop single, though it makes no appearance in the top 10 of any earlier Melon charts. It was not until 1988 when UB40 recorded this reggae-fusion version that the song was finally able to not only infiltrate the Korean music scene, but completely dominate it. What makes this song’s appearance interesting is that it is a clear example of music that is derived from Black culture being deliberately and strategically combined with a pop sound. Considering that 1988 was only four years prior to the debut of the first ever K-pop group, it is a strong possibility that the success of this

song, which combines highly identifiable aspects of reggae music with catchy elements of pop, contributed to the formation of the vision in South Korean citizens that would go on to birth K-pop, which is essentially a style of music that is based on piecing together aspects of already existing genres and refining them to create a unique sound and performance experience.

1990 marks a pivotal turning point in South Korean music history in respect to this thesis topic. In addition to the fact that there is a relatively large number of Black performers that can be seen in this year's top ten, two of the songs have important potential implications for the formation of K-pop as a genre. First, the song "Ice Ice Baby" is at number ten on the chart. This song, performed by white rapper Vanilla Ice, was the first hip hop track to hold a spot in the top 10. The history of hip hop in Korea, which will be discussed in more detail later on in this chapter, can be traced back to the mid 80s. So why then, did it take until 1990 for a song in this genre to finally hold a place in the Melon top 10? The answer may lie in the demographic of the South Korean audience and in the race of the performer himself.

Although hip hop culture had begun permeating South Korean society around 1985, its consumers were primarily young people (Vulture, January 15, 2019). Those in the younger generations tend to be more open minded and liberal in their ideologies, so a transition into consuming an unfamiliar genre of music such as hip hop could have come relatively easy to them. To older, more conservative generations however, this most likely was not the case. In addition to not being regularly exposed to settings in which hip hop music and culture were being circulated, older consumers of international music

could have stagnated hip hop's influential rise up until the year 1990 because they did not approve of consuming content that was made by a primarily Black demographic due to a cultural sense of anti-Blackness and conservative values. However, once a white hip hop artist came along in 1990, it made the music, and therefore the genre, more tasteful and tolerable to South Koreans in older generations that comprised a large portion of the music market. And once this occurred, the song was able to get the exposure and the positive response it needed in order to infiltrate a high spot on the Melon chart.

The second song that holds key significance for 1990 is New Kids On the Block's "Step By Step," which is seen at number seven on the chart. Although New Kids On the Block is an all-white pop and R&B boy band, their origins are undeniably stemmed from, and even intended to imitate, Black music and culture. Donnie Wahlberg, one of the five members of the band, stated in an interview in 2009 that there was "an obvious chain of influence" when referring to the Jackson 5's relationship to his own band (MTV News, June 30, 2009). And although Wahlberg was in this quote attempting to portray the Jackson 5 as a mere inspiration for his career as an artist, further analysis can show that the New Kids On the Block were actually a direct, intentional, and goal-oriented derivation from Black boy bands, such as Motown's the Jackson 5.

In an interview with an LA Times journalist in 1989, New Kids On the Block manager Maurice Starr essentially admitted that the most marketable feature for his group was the members' possession of "soul" because they could "sing black (LA Times, June 4, 1989)." Furthermore, the author of the article even describes their "style" as being "black (LA Times, June 4, 1989)." What both of these quotes do is they exemplify the

idea that Black people and their culture are nothing more than props and accessories that can be used at the disposal of white people to create an aesthetic that can then be immediately translated to profitability in the global market. In other words, the commentary from both Starr and the author of the article demonstrate that there is a collective acknowledgement of the commercial value that is found in removing visual and musical signifiers of Blackness from their usual context on and around Black people and instead giving them a non-Black face. So, the fact that this group and one of their songs secured a spot on the 1990 Melon chart demonstrates an instance in which Black music was being consumed, but only as an artificial and intentional construction. Consequently, it is possible that seeing non-Black people incorporating elements of Black culture and musical performance could have also contributed to the vision that gave rise to the K-pop industry as we know it today. The global and domestic success of New Kids On the Block potentially aided in the opening of the door that condoned using Black culture and music as a ticket to success in the global mainstream. Furthermore, their popularity in Korea could have also rekindled an music industry-wide interest in boy bands, hence the emergence of Seo Taiji and Boys less than two years later.

Interestingly, the years 1991 and 1992 both show that the Korean population was at this point, consuming a lot of Black music. Four songs out of the top ten in 1991 were from Black music genres that were performed by Black artists or by a group that contained a Black artist. And in 1992, half of Melon's top 10 were songs in Black music genres performed by Black artists, or a group that contained a Black artist; this is the

highest number of Black music and artists that have been included in the top ten on the Melon chart at one time.

Spotlighting the appearances of Black music and Black artists on the overseas Melon chart throughout the years building up to the emergence of K-pop is important in that it proves that the South Korean music audience had been consistently exposed to and consuming elements of Black culture and music outside of a hip hop setting. However, when you analyze the forms of Blackness that are being leveraged within the current K-pop scene, hip hop contexts are the primary ones in which you can see them being appropriated. What this says is that there is a specific caricature of a Black person that South Koreans feel these components of Black culture represent, and by looking at what Black cultural elements are included and in what context, we can begin to determine the harmful stereotypes that drive the decisions in the industry to include them only in these spaces.

It is possible that the emergence of successful white artists in Black genres in 1990 who built their aesthetic with an intentional proximity to Blackness made the less conservative genres and performances of Black music more appealing to a broader Korean audience. The significant increase in the amount of Black music being consumed in the years following 1990 can be considered a consequence of this occurrence. Furthermore, the success of Vanilla Ice and New Kids On the Block could have very well contributed to the formation of the K-pop industry. New Kids On the Block's stylistic derivation from Black boy bands such as the Jackson 5 could have not only resurrected the appeal associated with boy bands on a global scale, but it could have also resurrected

Korea's interest in Motown and their company model. The success of Vanilla Ice could have also played a significant role, with his global success acting as a testimony to the fact that a non-Black artist can still thrive as a rapper. Both of these occurrences in 1990, along with the significant cultural impact that Motown and its artists had in South Korea and worldwide throughout previous years, can be considered key components which indicated that there was a market niche for K-pop.

THE SIGNIFICANCE AND APPEAL OF THE MOTOWN MODEL

Music from Motown and its derivatives performed very well throughout the years on the South Korean music charts, and its prestige in the industry ultimately paved the way for K-pop. Motown artists such as the Jackson 5, Lionel Richie, and Diana Ross can be seen repeatedly in the top ten of the Melon overseas synthesis chart over the years. And New Kids On the Block, a 90s boy band said to take after the Jackson 5, had a dominating chart presence as well. The reach of these influences were not limited just to South Korean music culture, but permeated other aspects of their society as well. The 1987 cartoon film and TV series Dooly the Dinosaur has a character named Michol that was explicitly stated by the creator to be inspired by Michael Jackson (Seoulbeats, 2017), who was both a member of the Jackson 5 and a global superstar in his own right. Although this character has highly negative connotations and has been repeatedly criticized for being an animated representation of Blackface that will be discussed in the conclusion chapter of this thesis, Michol's existence does prove to be an example of how deeply Black artists such as Michael Jackson were able to infiltrate South Korea's pop

culture mainstream. The cultural implications of Motown clearly go beyond music, and it was a period in the entertainment industry that unknowingly paved the way for K-pop.

Motown was founded by Berry Gordy in 1960, a gifted songwriter with a keen attentiveness and revolutionary eye towards various aspects of live music performance that were unprecedented in the music industry. Not only did the company leave a permanent imprint on the music and entertainment industry, but its emergence and rise to the top catalyzed social and cultural change as well by using music to help mend the tensions of a racially divided US (BBC, 2019). Both of these attributes are why much of the K-pop industry is modeled the way it is today. Motown is often referred to as a “hit factory,” which creates a parallel between the assembly lines in merchandise production factories to its music making process. Gordy put in place a system called Quality Control, which was essentially a commitment made by all producers at the company to have their music be subjected to critique and criticism at weekly meetings in which Gordy was also in attendance (The Guardian, November 26, 2010). This system was put in place in order to ensure that only the best music was being produced and released under the Motown name; by combining multiple perspectives into their music production, there was less room for error, which maximized the success their content and artists would have in the music market. Below is a quote from Gordy that shows how he used his experience from working in at Detroit’s Lincoln-Mercury automobile plant to create a foundation for the company that we now know as Motown:

“Every day I watched how a bare metal frame, rolling down the line would come off the other end, a spanking brand new car. What a great idea! Maybe, I could do the same thing

with my music. Create a place where a kid off the street could walk in one door, an unknown, go through a process, and come out another door, a star.”

The main point to glean from this practice of Quality Control within Motown is the artificiality of the company’s music making process in order to maximize efficiency and success, and therefore profit. Multiple perspectives went into the writing, creation, and production of each song; the intent of this company was not to create music organically. Rather, its vision revolved more around finding ways to play and dominate the market by molding its stars to fit the demands of the American music market at large, which was mostly composed of a white demographic they were not a part of. Motown was a Black-owned, Black-centered business throughout its unrivaled reign in the 60s. Music made by Motown saturated the Billboard charts to the point that the racialized Billboard charts, one being the “Race Music” chart and the other being “Hillbilly Hits” chart, became obsolete for a short period of time; there was no need to track the music being consumed by these demographics individually because they were both consuming the same music. Motown was not only able to infiltrate the white music market, they were able to dominate it. This would have been a major point of attraction for South Korean music companies when first giving rise to K-pop in the 90s, and is most likely why the K-pop industry now utilizes so many aspects of Motown’s Quality Control and artist assembly line process as foundational practices in their industry.

In the late 1990s, Asia was in the midst of a large financial crisis (Shim, 2002). In order to work their way out of this predicament, the South Korean government turned to finding and funding resources that could be exported and bring in revenue to stimulate

their economy. One of their investments included pouring millions into developing a Ministry of Culture, under which was a department dedicated specifically to K-pop (NPR, April 16, 2015). So from its conception, K-pop was to be used as a tool to appeal to the masses and infiltrate larger music markets with the intent to generate revenue for the country. Its primary goal was always to accumulate mass amounts of profit for the benefit of the South Korean government and its citizens, which means that the industry must also include an inherent reliance on exportation. The dominance of the West in the global music industry made countries such as the US and the UK primary target markets for K-pop, neither of which have significant populations that are of Asian descent. The pioneers of the K-pop industry needed to find a way to make themselves marketable to a culturally diverse audience, and so they looked to the practices and traditions behind Motown, a company who had accomplished this very same feat over two decades prior, to set their foundation.

South Korea has used appropriation as a vehicle for their modernization since it began rebuilding its economy following the end of the Korean war. When the Korean war ended in 1953, it had left South Korea's infrastructure and economy destroyed in its wake. The country relied primarily on aid from the US during its reconstruction period (J. Park, 2019), but quickly managed to become an economic powerhouse in its own right once it had the stability to produce goods that were marketable to foreign markets (South China Morning Post, October 16, 2018). The Sibal car is a product that embodies the methodology South Korea's used to create their domestic products and companies. In 1955, Choi Mu-Seong and two of his brothers built the first car to ever be produced in

Korea, the Sibal. It was built in the shadow of the American Jeep, which were commonplace due to their use by the American military at Camp Humphreys, the military base that was established in South Korea at the start of the Korean war (Top Gear, October 28, 2013). The Sibal has an uncanny resemblance to the American Jeep, and it in no way denies that it uses the Jeep as a primary influence for its design.



Figure 1: 1952 Willys M38 Korean War Military Jeep



Figure 2: 1955 Sibal

In fact, the first Sibal cars made in Korea even used spare Jeep parts from the US military, further emphasizing the Sibal's inherent dependence on its American counterpart. The Sibal was a materialized Korean interpretation of the already-existing Jeep. It was repackaged in a way that made it appealing and accessible to the domestic market, and after receiving the Presidential Award, it became the vehicle of choice for taxi drivers in South Korea throughout the 50s. The Sibal can act as a metaphor for the Korean economy as a whole. Many of the products that come from South Korea are not new inventions, but fresh interpretations of an already successful product that has its origins in foreign markets.

Due to South Korea's late emergence to the global market, there was a greater amount of space for them to repackage and perfect already existing technologies than there was for them to invent something that was completely new and original. Furthermore, because they had to build their economy from the ground up during a time when there were already many successful companies in other countries, they had the opportunity to study the rise of these foreign companies and products. This provided South Korea with key insight that could not only help them to avoid the mistakes and shortcomings of these already established businesses, but also differentiate Korean products from the already-saturated foreign markets; South Korea could appropriate successful elements from multiple foreign models and piece them together in a way that gave their productions a competitive advantage. This was the country's methodology for producing the Sibal car, and it was the same methodology that was used to construct the basis of the K-pop industry.

The first K-pop companies and Motown are analogous to the Sibal and the American Jeep; Motown was a company that conquered the same feats that the K-pop industry was trying to surpass. Barry Gordy's hit making factory became one of the most successful companies of all time, garnering over 180 No. 1 hits in its lifetime all while appealing to a market whose demographic was not like most of its artists. Motown's signature sound crossed a plethora of cultural barriers and made its way into the hearts of people of all ethnicities and nationalities. In order for the K-pop industry to bring in a significant enough economic return to benefit the country, its companies would have to do the same. But furthermore, it would also have to find a way to surpass a language barrier, which is something that Motown did not have to worry about as much due to the sheer number of speakers and the hegemonic power of the English language (Guo, 2007). Korean is the seventeenth most widely spoken language in the world (World Population Review, 2020), making it a relatively uncommon language to be understood by most consumers in the global music market. But because K-pop had the ability to use Motown as a blueprint for the industry, they could extrapolate the strengths in the strategies used by Gordy and his team and apply it to this issue of a language barrier, all while replicating and perfecting the Motown method for building hit records and making superstars that appealed to the masses.

As part of their marketing strategy in the 60s, Motown used catchy song hooks, matching performance outfits, synchronized choreography and charm that would earn its stars middle-class respectability (G. Kim 2018, 30). The factory-like assembly line can be applied to the formation of Motown's stars in addition to its music. An integral part of the

Motown training process was teaching its artists to dilute or even alter their personal mannerisms and traits -- both on and off stage -- to ones that could be considered marketable and appealing to a diverse audience. All performers signed under Motown were put through a process that forced them to re-learn everyday behaviors: how to walk, talk, sit, dress, and smile, in addition to other aspects of daily behaviors that were gendered in order to create the personality image desired by Motown management (Pavletich 1980, 105). All idols in the K-pop industry today undergo this same conditioning, but with a few new additions. When idols first enter the industry, they are trainees. These trainees sign contracts with entertainment companies with the hope of one day being able to debut as an idol, but before this can happen, they have to compete against hundreds of other trainees that are under their company's tutelage (Rojak Daily, January 27, 2017). In addition to singing, dancing, and acting classes that are all practically identical to Motown's model, trainees are also required to take language classes, which are intended to prepare them to become a 'global star' (Rojak Daily, January 27, 2017). This is where the differentiation between Motown and the K-pop can really be seen. Because of the relatively small global cultural influence that South Korea had when the K-pop industry first began, South Korean entertainment companies made it a requirement for their idol trainees to undergo foreign language education, which would help them to be successful in their future careers should they move on to debut and actually become idols. As is expressed by this addition to the star-building curriculum that was founded by Motown, the K-pop industry appropriated their baseline song making and artist development practices, but manipulated them and made additions in

such a way that corresponded to the needs that would have to be met in order for South Korean artists to infiltrate the global market. The K-pop industry also revolutionized Motown's process by catering their curriculum to supplement the new age medium through which all of their music content would primarily be distributed -- digitally rather through radio or live performances. While Motown's process had re-taught all of its artists how to engage in daily behaviors that would ensure that they met the company's standards on stage and in press appearances, which sometimes included digital appearances on TV or awards shows, Motown's artists did not exist in an era where people were reliant on these forms of visual media, simply because it was not yet developed. Nowadays, there are talk shows, award shows, game shows, and digital communication platforms such as social media sites and digital streaming platforms like YouTube have both shifted and added to the platforms that artists of this age must be prepared to be featured on if they want to be successful in the entertainment field. Motown stars did not have to worry about their social media presence, or the fact that they may see a fan that recognizes them on the way to the convenience store at 2am and should be careful of what they wear, how they look, or what they buy because all it takes is a single photo on a smartphone to tarnish your entire reputation. K-pop idols have to worry about all of these things, and more. So, their training curriculum also differentiates itself from the Motown curriculum by addressing all of these new challenges. K-pop trainees are re-taught behaviors with a camera and the internet in mind. Idols are taught upon their initial entrance into the company how to behave in front of a camera, how to pose or stand in a way that makes them the most visually appealing, and they are also

taught social media etiquette, with many companies not even allowing their idols to have personal social media accounts out of fear that a single member's personal mistake on a platform can have consequences for the rest of the group and their company. Although the K-pop idol and music pipeline is undeniably modeled after the Motown assembly-line model, it does establish a form of originality by having the revolutionary eye to rebuild its model and cater it to the demands and circumstances of the current market and South Korea's cultural position in relation to the rest of the market. It incorporates principles that prepares their idols for marketing themselves through the globally connected digital media by ensuring that they are educated in a foreign language -- which is usually english -- and know how to act and present themselves in an age of constant surveillance, which are both developments that were added to the Motown curriculum in order to facilitate the success of the K-pop industry. But in addition to altering the music and artist creation process, the K-pop industry also utilized elements of hip hop culture -- which was not a resource at Motown's disposal during its prime -- as a means of further differentiating and generating appeal for the new genre that they were seeking to create.

Hip hop infiltrated Korean culture in the 1980s through clubs in Itaewon, a neighborhood located in Seoul that is fairly close to the first American military base established in Yongsan (Vulture, January 15, 2019). Itaewon had clubs that were frequented by American soldiers, but up until the mid 80s, Korean citizens were not allowed in these clubs. Furthermore, the popular clubs for Korean citizens often had foreigner restrictions, with some maintaining these restrictions to this day (Korea Herald, April 9, 2019). This established a literal physical divide between South Koreans and

Americans, and this severely limited opportunities of cultural exchange between both parties. Nightlife plays a significant role in youth culture. Night clubs serve as spaces to produce, consume, and regulate practices of youth culture that then drive pop culture. So with the constant separation of Koreans and Americans in nightlife scenes, Korean and American pop culture remained isolated from one another as well. This means that although hip hop had first begun taking the American mainstream market by storm in 1979 with the Sugarhill Gang's hit "Rappers Delight," there were minimal opportunities for Koreans to be exposed to or internalize rap or hip hop culture (Blanchard, 1999). When clubs in Itaewon finally became accessible to Koreans in the mid 80s, the dance-music boom was at its peak, setting the stage for stars like Michael Jackson and Run-D.M.C. and their music to gain a foothold in Korean youth culture (Vulture, January 15, 2019). Hip hop's music and culture entered the Korean mainstream primarily through dance.

Although there were multiple clubs in the mid to late 80s in which many aspiring dancers had congregated to showcase their skills, the Itaewon night club Moon Night has come to be known as an integral component of the cultural shift which assimilated American hip hop culture into Korean culture (Vulture, January 15, 2019). Moon Night hosted multiple dance showcases where people from all over Seoul could come to perform and compete. Many of these dancers brought the dance moves that they had learned from American GIs and used them in their performances. At this time, the style New Jack Swing was on the rise, which is a combination of R&B, hip hop, and pop styles of music (U Discover Music, July 24, 2019). New Jack Swing took the Korean dance

scene by storm, and these first interactions with the genre are accredited with being the catalyst that solidified the hip hop presence in Korea. So not only were occasions such as the Moon Night dance competitions opportunities to showcase and evolve Korean dance culture, but they were also settings in which many Koreans that were not necessarily involved in the dance underground were immersed in and influenced by American hip hop culture. Moon Night's status of prestige is for good reason. A large number of Korea's dance-music stars that would come to harbor the spotlight in the 90s had started their careers there -- including the members of the first K-pop group, Seo Taiji and Boys (Vulture, January 15, 2019).

Therefore, it can be concluded that although Black music was present in music charts well before the 90s, it was not until cultural exchanges were able to occur between American and South Koreans youth at night clubs in Itaewon that elements of Black music and performance began to take hold in Korean pop culture, thereby influencing the future of Korean music and dance performance. Furthermore, if you analyze the musical elements of New Jack Swing, one can draw uncanny parallels between it and the current K-pop industry. New Jack Swing is a genre characterized by “Upbeat, fast-paced, and characterized by sharp, clipped beats and meaty basslines topped with a mixture of rapping and soulful singing” (U Discover Music, July 24, 2019). Exposure to this specific genre fueled the establishment of the K-pop genre. Its pioneers combined the musical combinations found in New Jack Swing and applied them to the Motown model that had been so successful in penetrating non-Black demographics. So the demonstrated influence of Motown music in the Korean music scene shown via Melon music charts

combined with the cultural cross pollination of American pop culture that occurred in Korean night clubs throughout the late 80s and early 90s ultimately gave rise to the foundation that K-pop is built upon today.

PERFORMING BLACKNESS IN K-POP

By taking placing imagery rooted in Black culture only in hip hop settings or in settings in which themes that are associated with hip hop music are attempting to be exemplified, such as violence, masculinity, aggression, and sexualization, the K-pop industry is perpetuating harmful stereotypes about Black people. For a majority of the time that one can see Blackness being performed within in commercialized K-pop content, the elements of Black culture are being appropriated for the sole purpose of establishing a hip hop aesthetic. This pick-and-choose method of when and when not to incorporate elements of Black culture essentially insinuates that there is a specific persona that is associated with Black people, and it has a place only within a realm of hip hop. In other words, there is a one-dimensional view that South Koreans hold in regards to Black people and culture, and this particular cultural view is exemplified by the repetitive and calculated use of Black elements only in and around rap music or songs that are charged with one of hip hop's commonly associated themes.

Because K-pop is completely artificial, we know that no aspect of the industry, including its music or its visuals, grew organically. This means that there is a specific purpose or intent that drives every decision that is made in its production. Therefore, the K-pop industry can be interpreted as a synthetic representation of the values held by the

society that created it. So in looking at the visual and musical elements of hip hop that are utilized in K-pop, we can pinpoint specific contexts in which demonstrations of Blackness are encouraged and allowed. And in analyzing why the Korean entertainment industry strategically placed these components of Black culture only within these particular environments, we can begin to extrapolate the racial ideologies that are held by the general South Korean population regarding Black people and culture.

In 1992, Seo Taiji and Boys' song *Nan Arayo*, or *I Know*, was the first domestically created hip hop single that made it to the top 10 on the Melon Chart. The imagery in the music video has many explicit references to stylistic elements that are used in hip hop. All members are seen wearing outfits that directly reference clothing items popularized by American hip hop culture, such as snapback hats in a backward fashion, overly baggy clothing, gold chains and American sports jerseys. Furthermore, the background for a majority of the video is a white wall with graffiti style writing in English. Both the graffiti and the lyrics of the song itself use the American slang term "yo," which was a term popularized by the hip hop community, especially with the emergence of the 1980s TV program *Yo! MTV Raps*.

What this occurrence shows is that even from the point of K-pop's initial conception, appropriating visual and musical facets of Blackness became synonymous with performing within the hip hop genre; if you were a rapper or wanted to create a hip hop track, there was an expectation that elements of Blackness would be included in that performance, whether it be musically, visually, or both. This ultimately implies that Blackness and hip hop to the eyes of South Koreans were inseparable from one another,

and so being Black became exclusively associated with the persona that is epitomized by the hip hop genre. The relationship that is exhibited in K-pop between Blackness and the common themes of hip hop can be proven by analyzing the clothing choices of K-pop groups when performing songs with differing themes or undertones. The group whose attire choices I am going to dissect are those made in three different music videos made by the K-pop group BTS.

In 2013, the K-pop group that has now taken the entire music industry by storm, BTS, began their career with the release of the music video to their hip hop track “No More Dream.” In the music video, all seven members are shown in attire which clearly attempts to recreate a “hip hop” vibe: all black clothing, gold chains, a bandana tied to the head of someone in a Tupac-like fashion, a shirt that says “Notorious Swag,” backwards snapbacks, and even a curly perm and haircut that resembles a hairstyle that is commonly seen on Black men. Its lyrics are an ode to the world’s youth, urging them to stand up for themselves by denying the limits being set upon them by the older generation so that they can follow their own path. This video places trendy clothing elements found in American hip hop to supplement a predominantly hip hop-oriented song with lyrics that portray aggression. Keeping this in mind, I will now analyze the music videos of two different songs found on BTS’s 2014 album *Dark & Wild*, “Danger” and “Just One Day.”

The figure below is a still from BTS’s music video the song “Danger.” On the BigHit Entertainment website, under whom BTS is managed, the song is described as a “hybrid hip hop song with a piercing punk-rock guitar sound.” However, I would argue that for someone with a Western music background, it would be difficult to classify this

song as being predominantly within the genre of hip hop. Most of the members in the video are pictured with relatively neutral and conservative clothing, but in analyzing why a particular member is depicted in attire that is reminiscent of American hip hop, one can see a pattern of usage for elements of Black culture within K-pop.



Figure 3: BTS' Music Video Still: *Danger* (BTS; *Danger*; 2014, © BigHit Entertainment).

Although this paper has already determined that representations of Blackness are used in K-pop in order to establish an authenticity and proximity to the origins of hip hop, this image showcases an instance in which the member that is clearly attempting to emulate an American hip hop aura is not actually a rapper, so the attire does nothing to validate his performance. Jimin, the member in the center of the photo, is wearing a gaudy gold chain and bracelet and a backwards snapback. This attire choice makes an uncanny resembling clothing that is commonly seen on Black hip hop artists in America. But since Jimin is not actually a rapper, why would it be included on him? Why not on members Suga (first from left), J-Hope (second from left), or RM (hidden behind Jimin, (center)), who are the actual rappers that could claim the outfit was in pursuit of

performance authenticity? In the case of “Danger,” I am arguing that Jimin being the only member in this attire was done not necessarily to authenticate the song as a hip hop track, but rather to establish a visual tone of aggression that matches the song’s underlying lyrics. Below are a few translated lines from the song’s chorus:

“Are you fucking kidding me? What am I to you?
Am I easy to you? Are you playing with me?
You are in danger now
Why are you testing me? Why are you testing me?
Don’t get me twisted”
(BTS; Danger; 2014, © BigHit Entertainment)

Based on just this excerpt above, one can discern that a main theme in this song is anger, and the artists are using vulgarity in order to express its intensity. The stereotype regarding Black men in hip hop portrays them as having a significant and innate proximity to gang culture, thereby associating those that “look” like hip hop artists with criminal activities and violence (Reyna 2009, 362). The problem in this is that Black culture gave rise to hip hop, so many of the elements that became signifiers of music in this genre are not actually exclusive to a hip hop context, though they are viewed in this way by people that are unfamiliar with hip hop or Black culture. This results in identifiable components of Black culture that are commonly seen in rap music to be viewed through the lens of the stereotype that is associated with it, even when they are seen on Black people outside of that musical context, such as in real life. This then reinforces negative views about Black people in society by failing to acknowledge the cultural significance of these elements outside of hip hop, thereby creating a one-dimensional view of Black people as a whole. Jimin’s outfit in “Danger” is attempting to

leverage the stereotype that is associated with these visual components of Blackness that have become signifiers in hip hop culture in order to better match the aesthetic of the song. By going on to analyze the clothing choices for “Just One Day” music video, one can see that the decision to portray Jimin in this way was indeed a calculated decision.



Figure 4: BTS' Music Video Still: *Just One Day* (BTS; Just One Day; 2014, © BigHit Entertainment).

The figure above is a still from BTS’s “Just One Day” music video, with all seven members depicted against an all-white background and in outfits that are reminiscent of a school uniform in an attempt to recreate a school boy image. As a result, the image above conveys tones of innocence and playfulness, which compliments the message of the song’s lyrics. This track is essentially a musical materialization of the feelings that are associated with puppy love, with all of the members vocalizing their wish to spend “just one day” with the woman they have developed feelings for. This still shows no visual references to American hip hop whatsoever, and I argue that this was an intentional choice in order to preserve the atmosphere that is attempting to be created by the video.

Because symbols of hip hop are associated with stereotypes that are antonyms to innocence and purity, the inclusion of hip hop references would have clashed with the purpose of the song. As a result, BTS and their management purposefully manipulated their clothing choices to exclude elements of Black culture because they did not fit their desired aesthetic. Choices such as those made regarding the depiction of K-pop artists in the “Danger” and “Just One Day” music video are made every day in the industry, and unfortunately these contribute to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about Black people that exacerbate the discrimination and racism they experience in South Korean society.

Slang terms, clothing, and musical components associated with hip hop and rap such as trap beats are often utilized in the K-pop industry to create a particular aesthetic. The context in which these elements are incorporated reveal the underlying perceptions South Koreans have about Black people and their culture. Patterns in the usage of Black culture can be recognized and attributed to certain themes or topics: ones that perpetuate the negative stereotypes of Black people based on the negative, overgeneralized perceptions of hip hop culture. Facets of Black culture that are appropriated into the production of K-pop thereby act as signifiers of the personas that are commonly exhibited in hip hop music and culture, and because these are the only contexts that they are included in, the industry further perpetuates the stereotypes by reinforcing the ideologies that drove these decisions in the first place. And so this becomes a cycle that exacerbates the racism that already exists in Korean society. In order to cease the

continuation of this cycle, we must find way to leverage the digital interfaces in which K-pop is circulated to create a significant force of advocacy surrounding these issues. The recommendations for the ways that I think this can be done are discussed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Conclusion

Chapter 1 sought to give a brief overview of the history of Black music in order to trace the original demonstration of Black music performance, the ring shout, to music derived from hip hop culture. This relationship was outlined in order to establish hip hop's reliance on live performance, which played two significant roles in its eventual assimilation into K-pop: to authenticate idols as artists and performers of both hip hop and K-pop. The process of this absorption was then discussed in Chapter 2.

The Data Analysis chapter analyzed trends in Black music consumption based on data gathered from the South Korean platform Melon between the years of 1959 and 1992. Examination of the international music being consumed within this time frame showcased a relatively steady consumption of Black music from more conservative genres until 1990. In particular, the South Korean audience demonstrated a consistent affinity for Black artists that produced music under the Motown record label, which I argue had potential implications for its company model being utilized as a blueprint for the foundation of the K-pop industry. I also highlight the year 1990 as one that catalyzed a significant shift in the consumption of Black music, and how the specific circumstances regarding the emergence of hip hop in 1990 foreshadowed the emergence of a K-pop genre that would use elements of Black culture to not only authenticate their use of rap, but to also extrapolate specific connotations from these elements that could then be utilized to perpetuate negative stereotypes about Black people in K-pop music.

The idea for this thesis came about when reflecting upon my own consumption of K-pop. I became an avid fan of the genre by happenstance; one of my friends had

introduced me to a couple of songs performed by the K-pop group BTS. After entertaining his song suggestions, I had continued to listen to the group in my free time and found myself building an emotional connection to both the performers and their music. And with this newfound interest in a genre that is historically known for exuding racist ideologies and exploiting Black culture for monetary gain, I found myself with a constant feeling of cognitive dissonance.

After falling down this rabbit hole, I began asking myself: by consuming BTS and K-pop content in general, am I voluntarily funding, morally supporting, and furthering the influence of a historically anti-Black institution? Yes. There was no sugar coating the answer to this question. The K-pop industry is built upon racism and the historical and current instances of colorism in South Korean society is undeniable. And being as though I come from a multicultural home where one of my parents is half Black and Asian, I have known from a young age about these ideologies of racism and colorism are also thoroughly embedded in the social culture of Asian countries and communities; these displays are not innocent, and they come from a place of sincere anti-Blackness. But then I asked myself another question: will it help to dismantle this institution and alter its future course if I just ignore it and stop paying attention to it entirely? After quite a bit of thought, I was able to come to the solid conclusion that no, it would not. I purposefully ignored the genre when I was first exposed to it in eighth grade because I refused to condone an industry that was willing to capitalize off of blatant racism; I guess I had hopes that the world would see that it was wrong too and just simply do the same thing as I did. But not only did the genre survive, it did nothing but exponentially grow in global

popularity, and it is now thriving at the top of music charts across the globe. So clearly, ignoring these institutional instances of racism does nothing to dismantle them. What then can be done in order to foster a respect for Black culture and its people in institutions such as the K-pop industry? This question has no simple answer, and it may have no answer at all. After all, despite the plethora of information that the American population has access to regarding the racial injustices present in every aspect of our society such as police brutality, the increasing mortality rates of Black women following childbirth, the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 among Black Americans, and the school to prison pipeline among many others, racism and acts of discrimination persist. And although the presence of social media has given individuals that perpetuate harmful ideologies regarding race a larger platform and an ability to influence a larger number of people, it has also provided those that are fighting against racism with the means to instantaneously obtain the personal information of perpetrators that can then be leveraged to hold them accountable for their actions and have repercussions in their daily lives.

Especially now in a time of COVID-19 and social distancing, a greater number of people will be on social media, constantly watching any new content being produced, whether it is from individuals or institutional entities. For example, in a TikTok social network post made by two white students — one male and one female — from Carrollton High school in Carrollton, Georgia on April 16, 2020, the both individuals advertise their racism by posting a video of themselves engaging in a metaphorical attempt to “make” a Black person. This includes mixing a number of specific “ingredients” that they think constitute the genetic makeup and behaviors of Black people, all of which were highly

offensive and derogatory. If the concept of the video is not bad enough in itself, both students in the video can also be seen explicitly referring to Black people using the N-word. These “ingredients” that they used to make their version of “Black people” in this spectacle included “robbery”, “don’t have a dad”, and “eating watermelon and fried chicken” among others. Outraged, a fellow classmate that came across this content on their personal TikTok feed saved the racist demonstration from the app and posted the video to the social media platform Twitter, providing the names and contact information for the school that the two students attend and asking their followers to reach out to the administration and advocate for their punishment. Well, the tweet went well beyond the eyes of just this user’s immediate following. In fact, it went viral across the entire network, garnering over 123 thousand likes and 46 thousand retweets in less than twenty-four hours. Within those same twenty-four hours, both students had been expelled from school, their extracurricular activities, and were no longer able to graduate on top of receiving widespread online humiliation. The girl from the video in question also had her initial Instagram account terminated, further exemplifying the fact that the consequences from her ignorant actions on TikTok were capable of permeating her presence on other social network platforms.

All of these things were accomplished via the capabilities of social media. Users from all over the United States had engaged with the Twitter post to spread awareness about these abhorrent actions, and although not all of those that interacted with the tweet may have reached out to the high school itself, the fact that so many online users had seen racist content connected to the name of the school was grounds in itself to make the

school responsible for holding these students accountable for their actions. Had the school done nothing, the views of the school and the two students would have been inseparable, and this would have been possibly met with even more outrage from users on these same online platforms, thereby escalating the situation even further. The mass exposure provided to the incident by Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram incited real-life economic consequences for the educational entity that these students were connected to. Although the school will still most likely suffer significant consequences from having these students associated with their brand, their punishment of and disassociation from these same students that tarnished the reputation of their capital-driven entity became inherent components of damage control. The school administration and district understood that in order for them to continue to receive funding and maintain a professional image, they must harshly and publicly rebuke the actions of these students in order to differentiate their views from those expressed in the video; any leniency in punishment would have been interpreted as complicit, and therefore supportive of racist ideals. All of this pressure placed on the school and its district was made possible due to the large amount of attention the video initially earned on social media. This incident goes to show that our current society's vast interconnectedness in conjunction with its information spreading capabilities that are made possible by the internet and its social networks have given people that are physically disconnected from an incident where an individual is seen inciting violent or harmful ideologies the power to call upon or pressure other entities to hold them accountable for their actions. Although the internet has been criticized numerous times in the past for giving rise to the concept of "cancel

culture,” which involves “canceling,” or boycotting the work and social influence of a celebrity or public figure, that has been seen engaging in actions that go against the principles that are generally upheld by politically progressive social media users. Some “cancel worthy” behaviors include: being found to have used racial slurs in the past or present, either on social media platforms or in video content, supporting far right-wing political leaders such as Donald Trump, defending individuals that have been accused or convicted of sexual assault, and publicly defaming or discrediting sexual assault victims among others. Ironically in the context of this paper, the concept of “cancelling” someone is rooted in Black Twitter content made in 2014 in response to a quote made by a cast member of *Love and Hip-Hop: New York*, Cisco Rosado. What started as a joke sparked a concept, and as it slowly began to diffuse into the rest of the platform throughout 2015, the term became one that was associated with celebrities whose behaviors had publicly offended social media users. And even from its official conception in 2015, “cancelling” someone involved disengaging from that celebrity or figure entirely, including no longer engaging with their professional affiliations or output. The problem with cancel culture is that what is intended to be a call for a complete halt of consuming content made by a specific figure can easily disseminate into a failure to acknowledge all entities or industries that said figure has been associated with. This complete halt of engagement can be dangerous, because it can cause those within certain industries to be left out to dry if high-level influencers have been caught taking part in unacceptable behaviors. Furthermore, it does not disrupt the ratio of supporters problematic entities to those that support neutral or inclusive ones; by failing to acknowledge a genre or an industry

altogether due to the actions of one or two influencers, you are helping to uphold their position in the industry altogether by not promoting other individuals or artists that can potentially overtake their position. By not asking consumers to seek creators that uphold their moral beliefs and then divert their attention and money to supporting their craft, the capabilities of cancel culture to make consistent and significant change becomes very limited. Therefore, we have to engage in an alternative form of cancel culture that takes this component into account if we want to increase its effectiveness at catalyzing social change. In the context of the K-pop industry, we must encourage fans in the states to be socially conscious and aware of the ideologies exhibited by the groups they support and to make their grievances with “cancelled” groups that engage in harmful displays of racism and cultural appropriation known in order to do two things: 1) apply pressure to K-pop groups and their respective companies to recognize the implications of their actions and apologize for them, which can ultimately generate a monetary incentive to abide by the social rules set by their fans and 2) to continue to circulate information that defines and analyzes the implications of cultural appropriation in hopes that increased attention to these issues will be capable of reaching those that are not well versed in, do not pay attention to, or are completely unaware of these concepts.

For those in their youth, it can be very difficult to distinguish their caretakers’ views and perceptions of the world from their own. This is especially true in a collectivist society such as South Korea, where the values upheld by the top of the hierarchy (the upper class and the older generations) have the power to define the acceptable actions and practices of those below them (Cho, Yoon 2010). However, knowing that these K-pop

companies operate with morals coming second to money provides fans with an advantage: if you really want change in the morals upheld by the industry, you are going to have to significantly impact their cash flow. The K-pop industry has shown their ability to cater fan complaints by altering some of stipulations found in idol contracts. In an article in *The Korea Herald*, Lee Jong-im, a researcher at the Center for Culture & Society, describes how the industry commodifies the personal lives of idols as a way to leverage their popularity to facilitate success in the industry (Yim, 2018). In other words, Lee describes how “profitability overrules privacy” in the K-pop industry, with this profitability stemming directly from how well these idols are able to live up to the romantic fantasies that set the expectations held by a large amount of their fans. The visual and performative nature of the K-pop industry also constitutes “selling” its idols. Performers in the industry are expected to consistently engage in “fan service,” which basically involves producing content -- whether it be virtually or in person interactions -- that are pleasing to the desires of their fans (Seoul Beats, 2014). This can come in many forms, such as getting glimpses into idols everyday lives, such as dance or vocal practices, participating in fan sign events where idols have the chance to meet with fans one-on-one, and even in homoerotic fanservice, where members of idol groups that are of the same sex show public displays of romantic affection to satisfy the demand of their fans displayed through fanfiction and social media posts (Seoul Beats, 2012). All of these things personalize the relationship between the idol and the viewer, and create an expectation that even the personal lives of the performers are dedicated to being something of consumption for the pleasure of their fans. So it is clear that the success of

an idol or group is correlated with their ability to appear that they have genuinely dedicated every aspect of their professional and personal lives to their fans. As a result, many idols and trainees are put on dating bans, as having a partner would indicate to fan bases that their life does not revolve around pleasing them. The occurrence of an idol having a romantic partner in itself upends the very fantasy that the industry is supposed to be selling. This displeasure with the romantic personal lives of the industry's idols immediately translates into an economic loss for the company that they are affiliated with, and this has created an economic incentive to implement the "unwritten" rule that idols are to be banned from dating (CNN, September 21, 2018). In addition to this ban on romantic relationships, idol contracts have also come to include personal restrictions for their idols from smoking cigarettes or getting tattoos, which not only further exemplifies the idea that the behaviors of performers in the industry are catered to pleasing their fans, but also that the use of their own body is limited by the parameters of the illusion that K-pop is selling. Because the economic effect of fans seeing idols engage in such behaviors was so significant, restrictions such as those described above have become normalized to the point that they have become just another facet of the industry; something that has to be done to merely get the job done. Although it is unfortunate that K-pop idols have to undergo such constant scrutiny and micromanagement from their agencies, these occurrences do showcase the power that the K-pop fanbase has to literally drive the direction of the industry. Therefore, the argument can be made that if enough fans who oppose the racially insensitive practices displayed in the K-pop industry cumulatively divert their funds to groups that uphold their moral principles while making their

reasoning behind this decision known, the loss in funds for those groups' K-pop agencies may be enough of an incentive to regulate their idols in engaging in behaviors being defined as harmful by its consumers. However, this is easier said than done.

In order to generate a large enough loss in revenue for displays of racism and cultural appropriation to incite management agencies to hold their idols to new standards regarding their comments and behaviors on race, there will have to be a collective and consistent loss in both domestic and international sales following certain conduct. Furthermore, agencies will have to be able to pinpoint that conduct as being the catalyst for this loss in revenue, otherwise they will be able to attribute the loss in sales to other factors that are unrelated to the incident. And the ability for this to happen once again falls upon the shoulders of both international and domestic fans verbalizing their discrepancies with the K-pop group and their actions and bringing it to the attention of their agency. In March 2017, K-pop girl group Mamamoo released a parody video of themselves performing Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars' "Uptown Funk" while in Blackface. The demonstration caused a large stir on social media, which led to the group releasing an official apology statement on their Facebook page:

"We were extremely ignorant of blackface and did not understand the implications of our actions...We will be taking time to understand more about our international fans to ensure this never happens again. We hope that you will help to educate us on these and other issues so that we can become better people and better artists."

Despite this act of despicable behavior, the group has since then gone on to become one of the highest grossing groups in the industry. This was not the first time the group had been involved in a scandal centered on race. Almost exactly a year prior to the “Uptown Funk” incident, individual member Hwasa posted a video of herself singing a cover to Beyoncé’s “Irreplaceable” in which she failed to refrain from using the N-word. What this proves is the lack of commitment K-pop fans have to stopping their consumption of content from groups that show racially insensitive displays, in addition to their naivety regarding discussions on race in South Korea.

The population in South Korea is recognized as being one that is very homogenous. Less than five percent of the population are not native Korean, most of which are of Chinese or Southeast Asian descent. So it is undeniable that the Black population in South Korea is very small, but this fact too often translates into giving Korean people the benefit of the doubt when engaging in racist or culturally insensitive behaviors; just because South Korea very little variation in its ethnic groups does not mean that its population is unaware of certain behaviors being racist. During a performance at the 1988 Olympics held in Seoul, South Korea, comedians Lee Bong-won and Jang Du-seok had temporarily suspended their use of blackface or “*sikeomeonseu*” performance tactics “as to not denigrate black people” since there would be citizens from Africa in attendance (Seoul Beats, 2017). This intentional avoidance of this display of Blackface at the height of its popularization in Korea by Lee himself indicates that its controversial status was indeed recognized by Korean society.

Similar to the stance taken in Mamamoo's apology for their Blackface performance, K-pop stars often hide behind a veil of innocence when they are caught engaging in such racially charged behavior because it is easy for them to be considered (by both domestic and international fans) as being incapable of understanding racism due to the homogeneity of the country. As a result, racist demonstrations by K-pop groups and individual idols are too often not taken very seriously, and they are merely brushed off and regarded as opportunities for learning. The 1988 Olympics situation in itself proves the awareness that South Korean society has about racism, and what actions and behaviors are acceptable and not acceptable in front of a global audience. Furthermore, because the main goal of K-pop is to gain revenue by exporting to overseas markets, production companies should ensure that they are being inclusive and respectful of all cultures and racial identities. If these production companies can conduct enough research that allows them to market to countries with diverse populations, such as the US, then they also have the resources to draw conclusions on what behaviors are acceptable and which are not, especially regarding the topic of race, which has been a very prominent and ongoing discussion in America. K-pop companies know what they are doing when a group under their label is coming out with a hip hop track and they put all of the idols in gold chains, snapbacks and basketball jerseys, and so do the idols that are putting these costumes on; they are attempting to take on a persona that does not belong to them because it sells. And until fans stop giving K-pop stars and their labels the benefit of the doubt when it comes to participating in acts of blatant racism and start holding them to the same expectations that they have for non-Black celebrities in America, these

behaviors will not stop, and they will continue to economically benefit from participating in modern-day Black face. The monetary gain that groups get from such behaviors will further condone these actions to be done by others, thereby perpetuating the cycle which reinforces racism and anti-Blackness in the industry. But the younger generations' reliance on social media for communication and new information has the potential to halt this cycle.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Just like in the US, and frankly around the world, South Korean youth are raised by the guidance of elders that deem racism as something that is acceptable and even encouraged. The interactive interface of digital mediums through which K-pop is distributed and social media can be used as tools to intercept the thought processes that allows South Korean youth to grow up thinking that these behaviors are ok, harmless and normal. Young people that are open-minded and willing to shift their mindset to one that values people of all colors and identities equally will do so on their own free will. But in order for this shift in mindset to happen, they have to be exposed to information that triggers empathy and understanding which causes them to question the practices and norms in their own environment because they have harmful implications for people that are not valued in it.

By engaging in discourse which outlines the racist undertones of practices in the K-pop industry and its perpetuation of discrimination towards Black people on platforms that allow South Korean and international K-pop fans to interact with one another, it is

possible that youth in South Korea -- which are part of the main market demographic of the entire K-pop industry -- can be convinced that supporting groups who engage in these behaviors is harmful, and therefore wrong. This realization can result in these fans altering the expectations they have for the behavior of idol groups, and any group that fails to meet these expectations will then fail to reap economic benefits from them because they will simply not want to consume content from artists that do not align with their morals. By shifting the moral expectations of these fans, there will also be a shift in the groups that they support. This diversion of money toward groups that only express positive and inclusive views on race, if it eventually goes on to occur on a mass scale, can ultimately create the economic shift that would be needed to convince K-pop companies that they need to hold themselves and their idols to a standard of inclusivity and cultural sensitivity which under no circumstances calls for engaging in actions or behaviors that perpetuate racism if they want to be successful in the industry.

In conclusion, through the power of education and visibility that is provided by interactive digital interfaces, the cycle that condones the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes against Black people and blatant demonstrations of racism can be stunted. If K-pop fans make a point to contribute to discourse regarding the insensitive depictions of Black people and culture made by idols while also diverting their monetary support to those that uphold principles of inclusivity and equality, they can both catalyze an economic shift that can force K-pop companies to adhere to their critiques and continue to grow a K-pop fanbase that is aware of the issues with these practices and advocates for their dismissal as normalized or acceptable behaviors in the industry. As the world

becomes more and more connected, it is not a matter of if this shift will occur, but when. And once this happens, the only K-pop companies that will be able to thrive are those that conform to upholding ideals of mutual respect for other cultures and equality.

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Vita

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