Kaitlyn Frye

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Dr. Fictorie

The Rise of K-Pop

Wednesday, September 12, 2018 marked the first performance from a Korea Pop group on an American prime-time television show. The K-Pop boy band, BTS, graced the *America’s Got Talent* stage performing their new single, *Idol*. The event was very much anticipated with the AGT twitter account tweeting out “the biggest boy band in the world on the world’s biggest stage,” and their performance lived up to the hype. From the top-notch choreography, to the powerful vocals, with all seven members looking sharp in their suits, performing on a stage where the LED’s matched the fun nature of their song, Wednesday’s performance was nothing short of spectacular.

With the current rise of interest in K-Pop music in the States, causing concerts to sell out in minutes and creating a fandom that is fiercer than ever before, it is important to remember that K-Pop has only recently stepped out to the spotlight. To fully understand this K-Pop craze that is sweeping across America, it is crucial to know the roots of the genre in comparison with the events of South Korean’s history, along with how K-Pop has slowly broken its way into the hearts of every teenage girl in America, and how Christians should view this new style of music that is becoming more popular.

**The Creation of K-POP in a Changing South Korean Environment**

World War II left the entire world broken, and every country was striving to move forward after the fighting stopped. Before World War II, Korea was under the rule of Japan, leaving tensions between the Japanese and Koreans, for the Koreans wanted to split and form their own country. At the end of World War II, when the Japanese surrendered to the U.S., Korea saw this as their chance to gain independence from Japan and become their own independent state. On September 6th, 1945, Korea declared that they were the Korean People’s Republic. However, that declaration was not viewed by other nations, and the independence Korea wanted did not happen. Instead, the Soviet Union and the United States ended up debating who would take care of the territory after the war, concluding with the decision to divide Korea along the 38th parallel. The North was given to the Soviets, and the South was under the United States’ control. (Seth, 306-308)

Even after the split was finalized, Korea still wanted to attempt to be one unified nation. However, in the short amount of time after the end of World War II, the North became polarized to favor Communism, while the South aligned themselves with Western ideals. Each side wanted to be the one to unify Korea, so their ideals would rule. This led to the Korean War that started in 1950 and lasted for three years. At the end of the war, the two countries were more divided than before, and ruined South Korea financially and politically.

After the Korean War, there was no stable government to take over in South Korea, leaving years of chaos and corrupt governments fighting for power. Then on May 16, 1961, Park Chung-Hee lead a military coup and took over the government. With this coup, the government became very authoritarian, with strict rules on what was allowed in society, especially with what entertainment media was deemed as acceptable. (Seth, 378-379) This regime lasted for 30 years but was able to greatly increase the economy of South Korea and bring the country from a developing country to being one of the main power houses in the world. Towards the end of the 20th century, a shift began to happen where the government became more and more democratic, as it exported more, and made a real name for themselves.

As the country was developing after the Korean War, their music was growing and changing along with it. With the strong American military presence in South Korea, the music that was brought to Korea had a huge influence. At the time, many Americans brought over rock and roll with them when they traveled abroad. Many Koreans were interested in this new style of music because it was so different from the traditional music they listened to. While the leaders did eventually ban the import of American music for it being “immoral”, it was often illegally smuggled in and played on the bases for many Koreans. (Kallen, 6)

With this huge rock and roll influence, a teen, Jackie Shin, decided to teach himself the guitar, like what he heard in the American albums, and he would play on the American bases for the soldiers and Koreans alike. (Kallen, 6) A fan of what Jackie Shin was doing was Lee Soa-Mon, who was invested in heavy metal. When the government tightened its grip on foreign music, Lee went to Southern California to learn more. While he was in America, he saw the birth of MTV and was amazed of the type of music that was being produced. He took his knowledge back to Korea and founded SM Entertainment, where he hoped to manage artists to be like what he saw in America. (Kallen, 8-9)

The creation of SM Entertainment came at a critical turning point in South Korea, for in 1988, South Korea was hosting the Olympics for the first time. It was around this time that the restrictions on entertainment was loosened, to give off the vibe that South Korea was flourishing not only financially, but culturally as well. With this opportunity, SM Entertainment was formed, and they debuted their first idol, Seo Taiji and the Boys, with music that was influenced by hip hop found in America, and well-choregraphed routines. With their debut, they were not widely received because the music was so different, but it opened the way for other groups to take what was done and grow the industry. (Kallen, 10-13)

After a while, this new craze grew in Korea, and more entertainment companies started to produce groups that preformed in the same style of music. With the rise of the industry, a military style training emerged when creating these idols, very similar to the militaristic past and present of South Korea. The training for anyone who got the audition was militaristic. It was focused on dance, singing, and learning English and Japanese, on top of learning “how to act like superstars. (Kallen, 18) Potential idols are held to high standards and are limited on what they can do outside of their work. However, this military-style training worked, allowing companies to produce big name acts like H.O.T., S.E.S., BigBang, Super Junior, and Girls Generation.

**The Emergence of K-POP in America: How it got here, and Where it Still as to Go**

In 2012, PSY released his hit song “Gangnam Style,” which quickly topped the charts not only in his own country, but also in other countries, including America. The upbeat music with the crazy choreography took the nation by storm. September 14, 2012, PSY performed on *The Today Show*, performing his hit song and teaching the dance moves to everyone in the audience. The music video that accompanied the hit song reached 1 billion views by the end of 2012, making it the most watched video of 2012.

With this massive success in America, PSY opened the eyes of America to a new genre of music, K-Pop. However, the fame of K-Pop did not last long for the majority of Americans. Gangnam Style turned into a fad, only leaving a few devote fans who still followed all that was happening in the K-Pop industry. There was some progress through. 2012 was the first year of KCON which debuted in California. 20,000 fans showed up to the event featuring all that K-Pop had to offer. The event continued to grow over the years, soon selling out tickets at the Staple’s Center in L.A. (Sprinkle) Even with this large K-Pop event being held every year, the majority of America was still left in the dark about what K-Pop was and the music that came from it.

In 2013 a new K-Pop boy band debuted for the world to see. They are BTS, their Korean name meaning bulletproof boy scouts. This seven-member band consists of 3 rappers and 4 vocalists. The rappers include, Rap Monster (Kim Namjoon), J-Hope (Jung Hoseok), and Suga (Min Yoongi). The vocal line is comprised of Jin (Kim Seokjin), Jimin (Park Jimin), V (Kim Taehyung) and Jungkook (Jeon Jungkook). The band was created under the record label, Big Hit Entertainment, which is considerably smaller than the Big Three record label companies. The boys started from nothing and fought their way to where they are today.

The question then becomes: How does this group of boys, who were nobodies when they first started, turn into the group that is leading the charge of bringing K-Pop to America and breaking all the records in the book? BTS has had three singles on the Billboard Hot 100. They are the highest-charting Asian artist to ever make it on the Billboard 200 albums. They were the first group to be number one on the Artist 100 who sang in a language other than English. They also won Top Social Artist in 2017 and 2018, beating out artists like Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift. (Sprinkle) While there are many factors that lead to their success, the music that they write applies to a larger audience outside of South Korea.

When it comes to their lyrics, BTS writes about topics that are real and relatable to every person. Their hit right now is “Idol,” a song focusing on believing in yourself despite what your haters are saying. The one line that is English is “you can’t stop me lovin’ myself,” a declaration that can easily be sung whenever needed. (BTS) The song, as well as the music video, is very upbeat, encouraging everyone to take the risk and believe in themselves and what they can do. It doesn’t matter where you are from, what language you speak, and who you are, we all need to hear this message over and over again.

The message of the song is one of the important factors for BTS when they write their music. In a recent interview with Billboard, the members of BTS described why it is important for them to write about their own experiences. Rap Monster described the members as wanting their music to “be a method of help for the world.” They recognize that everyone is struggling with something in life, and that music is one place we all turn to for support and comfort. The goal for the group is to create “good-sounding, healthy music” that everyone can listen to, and relate to while they listen. (Suga) With music being such an important part of people’s lives, they want to make sure what we are listening to is helpful for what we are going through.

This theme of creating music as a way to heal is not just found in the group, but in their label as well. The logo for Big Hit entertainment includes the phrase, “music and artists for healing.” (Big Hit Entertainment) The music that is being produced differs from that of the other idol groups because they desire to talk about topics that everyone experiences, and not just play it safe with the traditional pop topics. Big Hit and BTS promise their fans that they are going to talk about “what’s really inside (them)” and not try to put on a mask that everything is okay, when reality tells a much different story. (Rap Monster) BTS has covered a variety of topics from bullying, depression, mental disorders, love, loss, and learning to love oneself.

Idol is just one of their many songs that carry a meaning that is close to the members, and expands over cultural barriers. Their fans have tweeted multiple times how the songs from BTS have helped them through what they are going through. While I cannot speak on the behalf of all their fans, for they have their own struggles they are working through, I can speak for myself. There are multiple songs that I love, and once I read the English translation of the lyrics, the song reaches me at a deeper level than just good music to listen to. The song that I will keep on repeat for hours on end is “First Love.” This song was written by band member Suga, focusing on the activities and hobbies that we fell in love with growing up that has since fallen to the side. Suga recalls how he fell in love with the piano when he was younger, yet he forgot this love as he grew up, only to come back to that same piano with a deeper understanding of how it shaped him and why he needs it. (BTS)

This song resonated with me because I get so focused on what needs to be done, that I lose the joy that I once had. For example, I grew up dancing. I was in all the dance classes, I would dance around the house, and I was that girl who wanted to be a dancer when she grew up. However, as I grew up, I was worried that I wasn’t good enough as a dancer, so I became afraid to dance in public. I didn’t join the swing dance when I arrived at college because I was afraid that I would be mocked and laughed at. I felt that way for the longest time. Even after I joined the swing dance club, I always felt like I was being judged and not good enough.

This song opened my eyes to why I fell in love with dance in the first place. It wasn’t to get people’s approval, but it was a way to express myself, and to release every emotion that I locked inside. This song helped me to feel confident in my dance. I slowly started dancing for myself and to express how I felt, and not to impress people. I will even go outside in a middle of a field and start dancing, not worried about who is watching, because dance is what I love, and no one can take that from me.

This is just one example of how one of their songs spoke to me and changed the way I think about myself in relation to the world. It doesn’t matter that it is in a language that I can’t understand, because the story of the song is more important than the language it is sung in. Even when listening to the song for the hundredth time, just the way it is rapped tells the story. I am just one representation of what their millions of fans feel to as they listen to their music.

However, with all this success in America, BTS and K-Pop still have a long way to go before they can really be successful in America. One issue that many fans complain about is that while it is big that BTS has been recognized at American music award shows, they are recognized for their fan base, “focusing more on ARMY rather than the global stars themselves.” (Waltham) Being the top social media artist is still a big honor, especially when you beat the greats like Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift, but BTS is a band that produces music. It is their music that they still have not be recognized for.

Another issue that gets their fans riled is the fact that BTS is not played on the radio. If enough fans request their music, then the radio stations will eventually give in and play one song, but otherwise, you can’t find any BTS songs on the airways. Some people argue that it is because it is in a different language, yet Descpacito was played all the time when it was released, and that song is in Spanish. It is not just Despacito that has been played on the airways, for smaller not English-speaking songs, were played without having their fans to go “to the extremes” that BTS fans do just to hear their song. (Waltman) While BTS has broken through into America and has educated us in the genre of K-Pop they still have a long road ahead of them before they are widely accepted.

**The Christian Response to BTS**

September 24th, 2018 marked another historical event for the group BTS. BTS presented a speech to the United Nations on behalf of UNICEF at the launching of Generation Unlimited, focusing on giving kids the access to education and resources around the world. BTS has had a long partnership with UNICEF with their “Love Yourself” campaign, focusing on ending violence “towards children and teens around the world with the hope of making the world a better place through music.” Their series of albums that the group has recently release focuses on the idea of learning to love yourself, and inspiration message that every youth around the world needs to hear.

This message presented by the group has certainly made an impact on the fans of BTS. During the speech on Monday, Kim Namjoon, also known as RM, told of the impact that their songs have made on their fans. BTS has heard “remarkable stories from (their) fans all over the world, how (their) message has helped them overcome their hardships in life.” It is clear the impact these seven gentlemen have on people’s life.

In contrast, can the church and the body of believers say the same thing? Can the church claim that they are having a positive impact on their young adults that they are there to help the next generation through the hardships of life. As Aaron Baart talked about in chapel during the 2017-2018 school year, many young adults are leaving the church. Upon further research into why the younger generation is walking away, a common theme emerged: the church is “hypocritical, judgmental, too political, and out of touch with reality.” The younger generation feel excluded from the church, and with no connection the body of Christ, find it easier to walk away and follow God on their own. The question becomes, what is BTS doing right that is able to touch the hurting hearts of those in the younger generation that the church can learn from? Two difference immediately come to light after watching the UN speech made Monday, BTS is real about their faults and their mistakes, and they are willing to share their stories of how they got to be where they are today.

When it comes to the lives of BTS, they do not shy away from showing their faults. BTS also doesn’t just show their faults, but recognize that they are who they are because of all their “faults and mistakes.” Living in a fallen world, we all sin, but instead of hiding it, BTS embraces the fact that out faults shape us just as much as our successes. For all the mishaps in life make up “the constellation that is my life.” We learn from our mistakes. We grow in our weakness. We learn to love through our trials. Once we embrace our mistakes and past failures, we allow for God to step into our life and bring us ever closer to him.

2nd Corinthians 12:6-10 is the letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the throne in his flesh, “a messenger from Satan.” We all have these thorns in our flesh, whether it be a sin we can’t overcome, or a scar that has shattered out heart, we all have something. Paul continues on the letter with the fact that he “will boast all the more gladly about (his) weakness.” The reason that Paul is boasting is so that “Christ’s power may rest in (him).” Paul understand the importance of our weakness, failures and sins, because those are the times where he is closest to God. Those are the time that he is open to God’s teaching, and it is the best time to learn. Paul understood this in his time, and BTS understands it now, yet the church seems to missing the mark when it comes to embracing weaknesses.

In a conversation with one of my friends a while ago, she commented that church is a place to go when you need prayer over body parts and physical health, but never about the emotional and spiritual hurt that was on the inside. This was after an experience where my friend was desperately hurting, and when she went to talk to some of the members form her church, them clammed up and tried to change the situation as fast as possible. Even around Dordt College, when peers ask for prayer requests, they only expect for surface level answers, and anytime you try to go any deeper, they don’t know how to move forward.

The next thing that BTS has figured out that the church is still in the dark about is about having the ability to tell our story, our testimony. As talked about in the previous section, BTS uses their songs as a platform to share their stories in hope to help the world. Stories range Jungkook reflecting on what it meant to be with his band members the past seven years, to Suga’s struggle with depression, and to RM’s struggle to accept himself as a rapper and a human. There are a wide variety of songs covering a wide variety of topics that can reach a majority of the younger generation one way or another.

Yet when it comes to the church, one of the reasons that many people are leaving the church is the “lack of testimonials” or stories from the other members. Humans are storytelling creators by nature. We learn through stories of works and what doesn’t work. When we have the chance to listen to what others have been through, allows us the opportunity to either avoid those same mistakes, or to feel connected with someone who can help.

However, the church seems to have forgotten the power of a testimony. We are commanded as believers to tell of “everything the Lord has done for you.” (Mark 5:19) The greatest way to share God’s love to show the real-world examples of how he is working in our lives. However, this means that we also have to show the mistakes and faults of our past, because you can’t show how God saved you if you don’t first admit your failures. But instead of being willing to be vulnerable with others, the church only talks about safe subject, surface level topics without every going deeper.

In a study of BTS songs, they start from the point of their brokenness and failures and take the rest of the song and work their way through the struggle that they went through to come out on the other side healed. Even when their songs didn’t have that typical happy ending, you saw the struggle and the pain that they are going through. That is why people can relate, and that is what the church is lacking. The stories that we tell are the greatest form of healing and is something that should not be kept a secret.

Towards the end of the UN speech, Kim Namjoon proposed a question to the members of the UN and the youth around the world that was watching. “What is your name? What excites you and makes your heart beat? Tell me your story. I want to hear your voice. I want to hear your conviction.” The only way that we are going to change for the better, is if we take the time to tell our stories, of the struggle and the hardships, and how we came to a place where we love ourselves. Kim Namjoon’s last call to action was for everyone to “speak yourself,” and that is what I intend to do, for things we talk about should not just be theory, but should be practices that we implement in our daily lives. Below is a piece reflection on my interaction with the church growing up, and how forces outside the church influenced me more than the church did.

Letter to the Church

Where were you when “I stopped looking up at the night skies, the stars?” Where were you when “I stopped daydreaming?” Where were you when my “millions of dreams (that were) keeping me awake,” morphed into me trying to “jam myself into the molds other people made?” And it’s not just other people’s mold but yours as well. Every service turns into a prison sentence, adding on one more chain of expectation that I couldn’t escape. A list of do’s and don’ts without ever addressing the why.

Why do I have to surrender my dreams for your perceived reality?

Why would this God you claim loves me so much to send his Son down to die for me create an institution that destroys His own creation?

Why in anyone’s right mind do I have to fit into your mold?

Every day I turn away, a black hole in my heart longing to be filled, and your rules so engraved into my brain that I “began to shut out my own voice.” Slowly, I turned into one more of your mindless hypocrites.

Where were you when I first stepped on Dordt’s campus? Core 100, my first class, cemented in my head that I don’t belong, and I never will. For even in a different denomination, faith in nothing more than a set of rules, except this time the rules were more than I can comprehend. KSP-151 threw jargon at me so hard that it forced me into a machine that could spew any fact at a snap of a finger. My beliefs no longer mattered as long as I got the right answer.

I would show up on Sunday, looking for a warm embrace and all I got was a cold shoulder. My mess was too much to handle, because once again I didn’t fit into the mold of the good Christian. You guided me as I transformed from someone who was human into a monster. I began “habitually saying I don’t give a shit, I don’t give a fuck,” to what happened to me, for who I am was not controlled by me, but by those who wrote the rules. Yet at the same time I would look at my reflection in the mirror exclaiming, “I really really hate myself” so that by the end of freshman year, I wanted to end myself.

Yet the irony is that the “only helping hand that (would) embrace my pain” was not from within the church, but from one who had left the church before me. He was the first one woke me “from being suffocated,” first one who let “me be me”, and first one who has “given me wings” to fly out of the pit I was in. He gave me more support, and set me on a path back to God, better than you ever had.

Where are you now? My senior year of college and I am still walking this path without you. For I know now that God has never left me, because of the countless times I can recall that he was right by myside. You on the other hand, abandoned me a long time ago. I’m finally “starting to love myself, little by little,” but it was no thanks to you.

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