

# **From Nobody to Somebody: A cultural study of the rise of the Kpop group BTS in the US dominated music industry**

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## **Abstract:**

“Who says a dream must be something grand?

Just become somebody

We deserve a life, whatever, big/small,

You are you after all” - ‘Paradise’

The acronym BTS stands for Bangtan Sonyeondan (meaning Bulletproof Boy Scouts)/ Behind the Scenes. But today it stands as the voice of the youth or the voiceless. Coming to the global limelight from an unknown industry was never easy. But today they are acclaimed as the next Beatles. Their fandom ARMY which exceeds to millions comprises of both Korean and non-Korean speakers. In spite of the lyrics being in Korean and the language barrier, all are united. The rise of BTS has been an unprecedented phenomena in the global music industry. In this paper I would like to talk of the nuances in the relationship fostered by BTS in their ever growing popularity.

**Keywords:** K-wave, K-pop, idol, Love yourself, intrapersonal, interpersonal relation, Limerence effect.

## **Introduction:**

The Korean Wave refers to the growing popularity of the South Korean culture since the 1990s. The Korean term for the phenomena is Hanryu, romanized as Hallyu. The term is made of two words: han, meaning “Korean”, and ryu, meaning “flow” or “wave”. It evolved from a regional development to a world wide phenomena. It began with the spread of K-drama and K-pop across East, South and Southeast Asia. The technological bloom which can be seen in the area of the internet

and social media led to the proliferation of Korean culture across the globe. The twenty first century saw the burgeoning of the Korean economy as a result of its emergence as a leading exporter of popular culture and tourism. This was not an independent process. This was in sync to the growing curiosity of man to know of the other, be it their neighbor or ones who are on the other side of the earth. The unfamiliarity to the beauty care, tv series, idol concept etc hooked the audience. Today the Korean Wave influences the contemporary culture, music, film, food and beauty industry as well as the behavior of the people. The Wave is part of “soft power”. Soft Power is a term coined by Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye. It refers to the intangible power a country yields through its image rather than its physical attributes. This is why it is the most prioritized factor in Korea. There was a surge in the Korean economy as the export of the Korean content and consumer goods increased by 8.4%.

Of all the different sections of the Wave, the K-pop industry is that which aggrandized the most. K-pop refers to the South Korean pop music which has been influenced by the different genres and styles from around the world such as hip hop, R & B, reggae, folk, country, rock, jazz etc in addition to the traditional Korean music roots. Modern K-pop “idol” culture began with the boy band H.O.T in 1996. What really caught people’s attention was the perfect mixing of different genres, intricate dance routines, colorful and fashionable outfits and top notch appearance maintenance.

The contribution of k-pop to the Korean economy is \$8 billion out of which \$4.9 billion is from the K-pop group BTS. BTS which stands for Bangtan Sonyeodan, also known as Bangtan Boys Scout is a seven member boy band formed by BigHit Entertainment in 2013. The septet co-writes and produces their own lyrics. There is a lot of introspection and reflexivity in their music which resonates with their listeners. They have always been experimental and bold in their approach to various themes such as mental health, troubles of school age, youth and loss, the journey towards loving oneself, and identity and individualism. They were never about making a catchy tune and visual. There was a preference towards getting across a

point, being a voice to the voiceless. A lot of work goes into their music. There is always a layering of subtlety and meaning as there is a play of literature and psychological concepts which includes an alternative universe storyline. Coming from a company that was inconspicuous and bankrupt, their growth was a success story written by themselves, through their music, fans and the different media platform. It was never a one man show. There was the nurturing of different relationships in the building of BTS, the number 1 boy band in the world.

## Discussion:

Kim Nam Joon (RM/ leader/ rapper/ music producer), Kim Seok Jin (Jin/ eldest member), Min Yoon Gi (Suga/rapper/ music producer), Jung Ho Seok (J-Hope/ main dancer/ rapper), Park Jimin (Jimin/ dancer/ lead vocalist), Kim Tae Hyung (V/ vocalist/ visual), Jeon Jeong-guk (JK/ main vocalist/ dancer/ sub rapper/ maknae) make up the seven member boy group BTS. They literally started with nothing. Of the seven members, only two had musical background, RM and Suga were underground rappers. J-Hope was a street dancer, Jimin was doing contemporary dance, Jin a film student, V aspiring to be a farmer and Jungkook only 12 years when he auditioned. Each one had to be trained to be an idol and the task was a drudgery in all its sense. There were ups and downs along the way with mostly downhills till they learned to go with the flow and to accept themselves for who they are. In the movie, *Born to Be*, which featured the behind the scenes of their 2017 The Wings Tour, revealed the story of the band's rise to fame. The film opens with a footage of the members designing the BT21 characters and soon moves to individual scenes of each member voicing their thoughts and fears.

The first struggle that each member faced was building a healthy intrapersonal relationship. Questions had haunted them regarding whether they were made for the idol world, would they and their songs be accepted, were they worth it and so on. These questions and uncertainties led them into depression. The first battle that they had to face was their fight with themselves where they had to learn to accept that this is how they were and that as long as they don't accept that, no one else can accept them either. In the movie, Jin who had to learn to sing and

dance after joining the group talks of how insecure he was of his voice which made him lose his confidence and withdraw into himself. Jimin, the second youngest member in the group talked of his body image struggles. Once he went for a one meal a day diet in order to be presentable which resulted in acute malnourishment. He talks of this through his solo music *Lie*, *Serendipity* and *Promise*. In *Lie* he talks of how he was living a lie saying that he was fine while in reality he was disgusted with himself, in *Serendipity*, he promises his fans that he would start to love himself because his fans love him for who he was and finally in *Promise*, which is like a conclusion to his journey, he asks his fans to make a promise to him and to themselves to love oneself. This series was a therapeutic journey for both him and his followers. Only when you open up to yourself can you open up to others. Human relationship just does not mean your relationship to a fellow human but also a relation to oneself. The present theme that BTS is conveying through their music is about loving yourself. It was not by accident that they came up with this concept. It was their lived experience.

What am I doin' with my life

This moment wont ever come again

Im asking myself again, am I happy right now? (Intro: The Most Beautiful Moment in Life)

The second step they took was building interpersonal relationships, starting by nurturing companionship within the group. In every interviews they attend, the hosts would always point about their companionship. They are more than just a group, they are each other's ears and shoulders during hard times. In their movies each member talks of how the others had been there when they had been down or uncertain. They were each other's pole star. Each of them talks of how their bond is a result of their shared struggles and efforts. Their daily life as idol trainees was broadcasted on TV. They would write letters to each other talking about their opinion of the other and what they meant to them. In the beginning they had shared one room, this practice is still continued in spite of them each owning Korea's most

luxurious apartments. This was to ensure communication with each other which is very important for a cordial atmosphere.

Every K-pop group has a fandom and the fans of BTS are called ARMY. BTS and ARMY are often mentioned in the same breath. This huge fan base which extends to millions comprises of both Korean and Non-Korean speakers. But this never stopped them from connecting. For every ARMY a fellow ARMY is family. People without friends found themselves surrounded by friends (people they never knew before) who shared the same taste in music. There is an unspoken brotherhood. BTS-ARMY relationship can be explained using the Limerence effect. **Limerence** is a cognitive and emotional state of loving adoration and attachment felt towards another person. Limerence is not reciprocated and is experienced as ruminative thinking and fantasising which one cannot control. This was how this effect was seen in the beginning; that of having negative attributes. In Willmott and Bentley' research, they found that limerence has a transformative quality, as the respondents noted a desire to look within and to work towards greater authenticity. BTS has always used the limerence effect to bring about a positive attribute. The relation has always been about giving back. When BTS was just a nobody, they had ARMY who believed in them and ARMYs around the world had someone who soothed their wounds and talked about issues which everyone wanted to avoid. BTS's giving nature inspired ARMY to give back and that can be seen in the donation and schemes that ARMY had started for others who were in need. **Save the Children** (US) is a project started by ARMY to raise money in BTS's name for the US organization that assists disadvantaged children around the world to grow up safe, healthy and educated. Using the hashtag #btsdonorarmy, A.R.M.Ys donated blood to the **American Red Cross** organization and saved lives. Many more projects have been undertaken by ARMY in various sectors such as education, welfare, health and conservation. It's not just them as it was found that BTS would always come to know of these initiatives and make a contribution of their own. After the Wings Tour, RM tells that if he, the members or their music could reduce people's pain by at least one or two percent, he would be content in knowing that they could make a change. They encourage the energy of ARMY towards a positive change in society.

The term idol often refers to a constructed identity which hides one's true self. Persona is often maintained in a fantasy state. But BTS has broken out of this construct. They show their flaws as well as their strength. In *Persona* RM talks of how he still remains in a doubt of who he really is, suddenly people come and say he is so and so but then in the end he comes back to his question again because he is always in a state of flux.

Other than ARMY, BTS also maintained a healthy relationship with their critics and haters. When people looked down on them or passed harsh comments, never did they retaliate. They would just take in all the negativity and channel it to create music, that's how *Mic Drop*, *CYPHERS 1, 2, 3* and *Ddaeng* happened. After receiving the MAMA Artist of the Year for the third time in a row, these were the words of RM *"It was never intended but it feels like I'm using you guys to love myself. So I wanna say something, please. Please use me, please use BTS to love yourself. Because you guys help me learn to love myself, every day."* They had just the same thing to say to their haters, "Love yourself". Through love and hate one must stick to oneself. You are your best cheer leader.

Their music spoke to everyone, be it to the weak, broken, voiceless and troubled. It was a therapy to both them and their listeners. The music does not come up just like that. They always intend a message. Sometimes metaphors and other literary devices are used for getting across their message. There is a lot of literature that is used. BTS has made use of both the reader oriented and the author oriented approach to the literary texts that they have made use of in their work. They practice their message here as well, that everyone belongs. In the music there is a quadrangle relation formed by BTS, ARMY, the author and the text. In *Magic Shop- Into the Magic Shop* by James R. Doty there's "A Neurosurgeon's Quest To Discover The Mysteries Of The Brain And The Secrets Of The Heart" the full title of Dr. Doty's autobiography, where he introduces a *magic shop* that would allow us to make fundamental changes in our lives, starting with our brains and hearts. Following in his footsteps, the boys released a song in which they consider themselves

ARMY's magic shop, where they comfort and encourage them to work on becoming the best versions of themselves. For the better understanding of the lyrics, BTS prompts people to read the literary work. Now here you can see how they promote a relation with the author and the cultural text. Author is in turn adding light and sound into the words of the song. In the same way there's *Jung's Map of the Soul: An Introduction* by Dr Murray Stein from which RM drew inspiration for his solo *Persona*.

Another one strong relation that BTS maintains is that with the media and social network. Every time they get ready for a comeback they give a full coverage of their activities to the media. They interact with their fans by holding live chats in Vlive. The growth of the app has being parallel to the rise of BTS. Now they have developed their own app Weverse where the members and ARMY chat and post. Their online appearance makes sure that fans around the world who cannot make it to their concerts can still see them. They establish connections with other celebrities by going on their shows. They have been to The Ellen DeGeneres Show, The Late Late Show With James Corden, America's Got Talent, Good Morning America, The American Music Awards, The Billboard Music Awards etc which gave them international audience. They have their own variety show called Run BTS where the members goof around and play games. This show helps others to see that at the end of the day that they too are just like the other twenty year old who just wants to have fun, spend time with their friends and have a great time. Their happiness at the simple things in life make their audience come in term with the idea that one can find happiness even in the most simplest of things. Every media said that there was no magic behind BTS's success story and that they just did their thing and the world had went with it as the world was waiting for someone to voice the very things that isolated them from others and were afraid to bring up.

**Conclusion:**

The immense backup BTS has is a result of the relationships that they had built along the way. They have become the voice of the youth and the voiceless and so their existence has become a necessity for others. It's a cyclic relation. There is a giving and receiving of positive messages.

The most important message that BTS spread is that of "Love yourself, Speak yourself". "You can call me artist. You can call me idol. Or whatever else you want. I don't care," the opening lines of *Idol* is directed to all those who tell us to be how they want us to be. One can try being how others want them to be but at the end of the day they are just who they are. This is a thought that lingers in everyone's mind but never voiced.

*"Maybe I made a mistake yesterday, but yesterday's me is still me. I am who I am today, with all my faults. Tomorrow I might be a tiny bit wiser, and that's me, too. These faults and mistakes are what I am, making up the brightest stars in the constellation of my life. I have come to love myself for who I was, who I am, and who I hope to become."* This was one of the highlights of the speech delivered by BTS at the UN. Their campaign against violence is being taken seriously by people around the world. The popularity of BTS and the platform of the UNICEF are combining their forces to fight violence.

Learn to love yourself and that would teach you to love others promoting others to love you back. The growth and maintenance of the popularity of BTS is one of the best example to how human relationships are important for one's upliftment. The relationship is not just the one that you foster with another but also the ones that you develop with yourself, with the media (which connect millions, including the ones miles away from you) as well as with your haters.

You showed me I had reasons, I should love myself. (*Love Yourself* – BTS)

You never walk alone. Look around you, there's always someone who wants to board the same bus as you.



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