

## **BTS' TRANSCULTURALITY: MUKOKUSEKI OR MUGUKJEOK?**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Korean pop, also known as K-pop has become a phenomenon in the music industry. What started as the Korean Wave (or *Hallyu*) in the 1990's, K-pop has "entered the lexicon of global popular cultures" (Choi and Maliangkay, 2014, p. 37). With the popularity of K-pop around the world, it is important to ask: what makes K-pop transcultural? In this essay, I explore the concepts of Iwabuchi's (2002) *mukokuseki* and Jung's (2011) *mugukjeok* by analysing BTS' branding, songs, and music video.

In this essay, I will focus on BTS, one of the most successful K-pop groups outside of South Korea. BTS has sold-out concerts across continents and have their own fan base that calls themselves the "Army." In 2018, BTS's album "Love Yourself: Answer" became the number one album in the United States, according to the Billboard 200 charts.

Another proof of BTS' popularity and influence was their invitation to give a speech at the United Nations UN General Assembly, the first K-Pop group to do so. UNICEF has also made them their ambassadors and a campaign to end violence against children and young people, "Love Myself", was named after their album. Just this March, BTS and their fan base, Army, appeared in *The Simpsons*, one of the longest running shows in the US and also an American pop culture icon.

Like many K-Pop groups, BTS relies heavily on the visual appearance of the "idols" (as K-pop groups are called in South Korea) and their performance. K-pop is criticized for having homogenous music and sound Western instead of Korean (Chua, 2010). Choi and Maliangkay (2015), however note that while "uniform" K-pop has been the trend for the past decades, these acts have been carefully adjusted to the audiences they are aimed at. For example, K-pop groups from the 90's started using rap for the bridge of their songs and many groups have followed since. Another example is the use of English phrases in K-pop songs beginning in the early 2000'. This was at first directed to the South Korean audience but proved to be enjoyed by foreign K-pop fans and is now devised for them.

The global success of BTS seems to be a combination of being a classic South Korean boyband but also being a new breed of boyband at the same time. According to Glasby (2018):

BTS's music began as old-school R&B and hip-hop, but has since incorporated a myriad of genres, from EDM to South African house. The lyrics, too, have become increasingly complex, closer to prose than simple moon-June-soon pop. In many respects, BTS fit the mould of a classic boyband – they look and sound great – but they are also grown

men who cry, embrace and expose their vulnerabilities and failings even as a culture of toxic masculinity thrives on- and offline. It strengthens their messages of strength, love, hope and acceptance beyond what boybands have offered before.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

*For the next step [of Hallyu], we shouldn't have that name. Specially, Hal [Han] in Hallyu actually means Korea. So, I think from now on, if you really want to take it to the next level, maybe we shouldn't have a name like that ... [Before] it was basically about introducing Korea, Korean songs, Korean dramas. And hopefully I think it can be changed into something like, sharing. You know, mutual understanding through cultural sharing.*

*— From the public lecture of JYP, a singer and music producer, at the forum "Hallyu in Asia: A Dialogue" held at Harvard University on February 16, 2007*

## TRANSCULTURALISM

Transculturalism is a way of life where "some individuals find ways to transcend their initial culture, in order to explore, examine and infiltrate foreign cultures" (Grunitzky, 2004, p.25) and is a consequence of globalisation (Hepp, 2015). Hepp (2008) and Grunitzky (2004) also highlight the role of mediatisation in transculturalism including in products such as music that have become accessible through the Internet. As we will see later, studies have shown that social media has become a vehicle in the popularisation of K-pop groups like BTS.

Fernando Ortiz (1995) first used the term "transculturation" and differentiates it from acculturation and deculturation. According to Ortiz (1995, p.102), transculturation is "the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another" while acculturation is "merely acquiring another culture." Transculturation also involves "the loss or uprooting of a previous culture" defined as deculturation and the creation of a new cultural phenomena or "neoculturation."

Ding (2014) defines transcultural communication as the exchange of information and cultural flows among groups of different class, gender, and ethnicity and examines interactions and negotiations between local and global processes, flows, and structures.

Welsch (1999) argues that with the entanglement of cultures as a consequence of migration and networking technology, there is no longer anything absolutely foreign

nor anything exclusively “own”, rather cultures today are characterised by hybridisation.

Hybridisation involves mixing of resources from different cultures, their combination and fusion where new cultural forms emerge and impacts on power relations. (Hepp, 2010)

According to Kraidy, hybridity is intentional (2005),

“Globalization and the commercial imperative to reach large audiences with minimal investment and risk have made hybrid media forms pervasive...despite their inclusion of ‘local’ cultural markers, the hybrid texts spawned by today’s global media industry are more akin to the technologically sophisticated but historically flat processes of digital superimposition and manipulation that create slick images for international consumption.”

Iwabuchi (2002) introduced the concept of *mukokuseki* in describing the popularity of Japanese culture abroad. *Mukokuseki* means products that are “culturally odourless” that helps them appeal to a global market. Kim (2017) used this term to describe K-pop groups.

Connecting to the concept of *mukokuseki*, Jung (2011) coined the term *mugukjeok* literally translated to “nationlessness”. Unlike *mukokuseki* where cultural products become “odourless,” the concept of *mugukjeok* argues that Korean texts retain their Koreanness, with enough elements that are recognised across cultures to facilitate global acceptance and reception. Its hybridity allows for relatability but at the same time, remains specific to the Korean culture.

## **HISTORY OF SOUTH KOREAN MUSIC**

After South Korea’s liberation from Japan, U.S. dominated the influence on South Korea’s culture, including music. The U.S. brought jazz, blues, pop, and rock which spread through technologies like radio, movies, and television. However, traditional folk songs also remained popular. In the 1970’s and 1980’s musician Cho Yong-pil became a superstar of Korean pop music and in contrast to current K-pop idols, relied on his vocal skills rather than his looks (Lie, 2012).

Lie (2012) argues for Cho’s “signified Koreanness” owing to the government’s aggressive policies on cultural nationalism and restrictions on music to be almost exclusively nationalist. However, with the invention of the Walkman, as television became a household necessity in the 1980’s and as *noraebang* (karaoke places) became popular in the 90’s, so did pop music become more popular.

The group SeoTaiji and the Boys was said to have started what is known as modern K-pop, incorporating rap and hiphop to South Korean popular music. According to

critics of that time, “it did not sound Korean.” They also introduced dance as part of a performance, something that all K-pop groups have done since.

In the mid 1990’s South Korean music was mostly for local consumption, until the *Hallyu* which started in East Asia. K-pop groups such as H.O.T (1996-2001) and V.O.X. (1997-2006) became popular across Chinese speaking countries. By the late 2000’s, the driving force of the *Hallyu* was K-pop.

## **K-POP**

Sakai (2012, p.38) points out that South Korea was able to capitalize cultural globalization from its “large far flung diasporing population” who “provided a ready source of information and expertise” in pop music. Lie (2012) also emphasises the role of technology, such as the introduction of mp3 formats and Youtube, in facilitating K-pop’s popularity across the globe. According to Kot (2009) and Austerlitz (2007), digitized music and videos reached an audience outside of national borders.

Why K-pop and what makes it popular? Lie (2012, p.355) says K-pop was able to “fill a niche that was relatively open for clean, well-crafted performers” and that it may have filled the gap left by “urbanised and sexualised American performers”:

K-pop exemplifies middle-class, urban and suburban values that seek to be acceptable at once to college-aspiring youths and their parents: a world that suggests nothing of inner-city poverty and violence, corporal or sexual radicalism, or social deviance and cultural alienation...

The oft-repeated claims about K-pop singers’ politeness — their clean-cut features as well as their genteel demeanors — is something of a nearly universal appeal, whether to Muslim Indonesians or Catholic Peruvians.

According to Romano (2016), there are elements into what makes K-pop unique: high quality performance, polished aesthetic, and catchy songwriting.

There are studies that have tried to make sense of the popularity of K-Pop around the world, some focusing on its popularity as a contraflow in global media flows dominated by the West, especially the U.S. (Chua and Iwabuchi, 2008; Kim, 2007). Recent studies have also showed reasons behind *Hallyu*’s popularity: Asian mode of modernity (Kim, 2005) and South Korea’s soft power (Kim and Nye, 2013).

In Jin and Yoon’s (2016, p.1287) study, they note that the appeal of K-pop to their global fans was because of “impure mixture of Western and local cultures” where it is both Western-inspired and “different” at the same time. In fact, in one of their



interviews, a K-pop fan from North America said K-pop, “is a mixture of Eastern and Western cultures...It’s not too traditional, not too unfamiliar.”

Jung (2011, p.3) argues that South Korean popular culture “is hybridised and influenced by various foreign cultures through transcultural flows largely facilitated by advanced media technology and globalisation.” Jung (2017, p.57) adds that hybridity in K-pop “creates complicated webs of transculturality, such as alternative forms of gender representation, cute culture, and honorific culture.

## **ANALYSIS OF BTS’s VISUAL AESTHETIC, SONG, AND MUSIC VIDEO**

According to Lie (2012, p.22), nothing in K-pop is “Korean” but a brand without the encumbrance of traditional Korea.” However, I would argue that while there is no “traditional Korea” in K-pop and while it has a huge Western influence, BTS as a brand is distinctly Korean, a *mugukjeok* and not a *mukokuseki*.

To answer the question what makes BTS a transcultural phenomena, I will be analysing a song and its corresponding music videos from BTS: “Idol” which has over 450 million views. These were chosen because of their popularity. “Idol” was also chosen because from their original video, a new video was made in collaboration with Nicki Minaj. Additionally, an #IdolChallenge was made by BTS fans, uploading videos of themselves dancing to the song. For the purpose of this essay, the original “Idol” video will be analysed.

Polished production and dance performances and social media and YouTube have been said to be crucial element of K-Pop’s success. Kwon and Ono (2013) also point out that because most of K-pop songs are in Korean with only a small portion of English, foreign audiences are unable to understand the meaning of the song and heavily rely on videos to read and interpret the text. This makes it important to look at BTS’ music videos and ask, what makes it popular across cultures?

Additionally, I will be analysing BTS’ packaging and branding — how they look and what they wear — by comparing and contrasting them with One Direction, also a popular boyband from the west.

I will begin by analysing the aesthetic difference between BTS and Western boybands such as One Direction, in terms of fashion and style.

## **LOOKS AND FASHION**

In his essay, Lie (2012) has described K-pop idols as “extremely photogenic” enhanced by plastic surgery and other interventions. They are all tall, thin, unblemished.

BTS (as photographed in Figure 1) is a seven member K-pop group whose looks and style are quirky and somewhat feminine. All members have highlights and/or coloured hair and wear make-up such as lipstick, foundation, eye shadow, and eye liner. BTS members also wear jewelry such as earrings and rings. They all have perfect looking skin, owing to their skin care regimen, which they have shared during interviews. They all look clean, well groomed, and fashionable.

Overtly wearing make-up and looking clean and unblemished is popular among South Korean male celebrities, including K-pop idols. This is in contrast to Western boybands such as One Direction (see Figure 2) whose image is manly and scruffy. One Direction members also wear clothes in neutral colours and show off their tattoos. On the other hand, other members have dissuaded BTS members who have tried to get a permanent tattoo. One of them, Suga, said in an interview that he wanted a tattoo but ultimately decided against it because “I want to do some charity work, but having a tattoo might work negatively.” This reflects BTS’ negative views on tattoos and the importance they give on looking clean. This is part of the Korean culture that stems from history, where tattoos are still a sensitive topic and which people are still uncomfortable about, equating them with anti-social and criminal behaviour. In fact, while having a tattoo is not illegal, getting one is, making tattoo artists operate underground (Taylor, 2015).

One Direction’s branding aesthetic is the same as other Western boybands that have come before them such as Backstreet Boys, Westlife, and N’SYNC. While BTS portrays a group of boys who are not afraid to be in touch with their feminine side, One Direction’s aesthetics is of traditional masculinity. Even the way they pose in photos shows strength and masculinity — forward leaning, legs spread — whereas BTS poses are softer.

K-pop groups like BTS are considered effeminate and project versatile masculinity, unlike their contemporary boybands from the West. This is a stark contrast to the traditional patriarchal culture of South Korea, reflected in recent scandals where K-pop idols have been caught operating a sex ring and recording videos of women without their consent. This “versatile masculinity” projected by BTS is fake or manufactured, as Jung (2011) would call it. According to Jung (2011) this allows K-pop idols to retain their national specificity while positioning themselves as a multinational, multicultural brand.

However, while BTS’ aesthetics diverges from traditional Western boybands, one cannot deny its western influence — the short and tie, the bomber jacket, graphic shirts. Nothing in their fashion is traditional Korean, rather using fashion influenced by the West while styling it for that K-pop look.

BTS’ projection of masculinity through their fashion and style, a hybrid of both Korean and western, transcends across global cultures and their concept of masculinity. It transcends through East Asia’s concept of “soft masculinity” such as the Japanese’s concept of *bishomen* or “pretty boy” but as well as the more western

concept of “metrosexual” which describes heterosexual men who takes care of their looks and grooming. This allows BTS to blur the concept of masculinity across cultures, where their masculinity is not too foreign nor too familiar to any one culture.



*Figure 1. A group photo of BTS members*



*Figure 2. A group photo of One Direction members*

## SONG LYRICS

The second part of this analysis is BTS' song lyrics. Most of BTS' songs are in Korean, with English lyrics in the chorus. For the purpose of this analysis, "Idol" will be translated to English in full.

### Idol

For the song, "Idol," there are more original English parts, partly because the song has been re-released in the United States in collaboration with Nicki Minaj. The original parts include:

"You can call me artist  
You can call me idol  
I don't care, I'm proud of it

I know what I am,  
I know what I want,  
I never gon' change  
I never gon' trade

Talkin' talkin' talkin'  
I do what I do  
Damn it, damn it  
You can't stop me lovin' myself"

"Idol" is a generic pop song with lyrics that anyone can relate to. It talks about loving one's self, which has become a popular theme of pop songs these days. It is similar to Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off", a song about doing what one loves and being proud of it. Taylor Swift's lyrics goes,

"Cause the players gonna play, play, play, play, play  
And the haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate  
Baby, I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake  
I shake it off, I shake it off"

"Idol" sounds like a combination of techno, hip-hop, and pop — something familiar with the Western music scene. It uses hip-hop beats with autotune, frequently used by Western artists. The background rhythm that goes with the song is also a popular beat that can be heard in almost all pop songs, the reason why pop songs sound the same. Metzger (2017) calls it the "Millennial Whoop", "a sequence of notes that alternates between the fifth and third notes of a major scale... A singer usually belts these notes with an 'Oh' phoneme, often in a 'Wa-oh-wa-oh' pattern." The Millennial Whoop can be found in songs such as Katy Perry's "California Girls", Nicki Minaj's "Check it Out", Justin Bieber's "Baby," One Direction's "Live While We're Young" and many others.

In “Idol”, BTS sings the oh-oh-oh-wa six times right after the chorus (1:26-1:31). Like other western pop songs, it’s easy to sing the lyrics “You can’t stop me loving myself” followed by the Millennial Whoop. It is an earworm for any listener, and can get stuck in one’s head.

“Idol” is also reminiscent of the formula of a K-pop song: a blend of pop, rock, hiphop, and EDM, which is also familiar to the Korean and East Asia market. The Korean parts of the song translates to,

“They point fingers at me  
But I don’t care at all  
Whatever the reason for your criticism is  
I know what I am

There are hundreds of me’s inside of me  
I’m facing a new me again someday  
It’s all me anyway  
So instead of worrying, I’m just gonna run

I’m so fine wherever I go  
Even if it takes a while sometimes  
It’s okay, I’m in love with my-my myself  
It’s okay, I’m happy in this moment”

Even in the Korean parts of the song, which is directed to the Korean audience, the song resonates the message of accepting who you are and being happy with yourself. For people who speak Korean and can’t understand English and vice versa, “Idol” has a universal message that is relevant for all audiences. In fact, because of the popularity of their song, they have been made a UNICEF ambassador for the “Love Myself” campaign and have been invited to speak at the UN General Assembly. The message in their speech is actually the same as what they sing about:

*Maybe I made a mistake yesterday, but yesterday’s me is still me. Today, I am who I am with all of my faults and my mistakes. Tomorrow, I might be a tiny bit wiser, and that will be me too.*

In fact, during their speech, they made it clear that their song was aimed at young people who are struggling. RM, one of BTS’ members, said in the speech: “After releasing our *Love Yourself* albums, and launching the *Love Myself* campaigns, we started to hear remarkable stories from our fans all over the world how our message helped them overcome their hardships in life and start loving themselves.”

Another element of the song, which might surprise their fans outside of South Korea, is the integration of Pansori elements in the song. Pansori is the traditional

music of Korea that uses a specific drumbeat. This drumbeat can be heard at the background, throughout the song, together with the African beat. Additionally, Pansori cries such as “Ulsoo” and “Jeehwahjah” can be heard in the chorus. One of the members, RM (2018), however, said that this was unintentional but that having learned Pansori as a child, they just kept lingering in his ears.

These make “Idol” a song that is successful across cultures — the message of loving yourself, the combination of beats and rhythm, the use of the Millennial Whoop — all make it familiar to the ear, even for the Western audience.

The use of pansori beats with the usual “Korean pop” formula and the use of Korean language makes it sound still distinctly Korean music. It is not traditional Korean yet still distinctly K-pop. The song is therefore not “odourless” as Iwabuchi might say because it is distinguishable from pop music from other countries.

## MUSIC VIDEO

According to Firth (1998), music videos can be categorised into three types: a.) performance videos, where the star or group perform in front of the fans; b.) narrative videos that tell a linear story; and c.) conceptual videos which do not tell a story but rather, create a mood through visual elements and there is a possibility of multiple meanings interpreted by the viewer.

“Idol”, being an upbeat song, also has an upbeat music video. It uses bright colours throughout the video, either in the background or in the clothes worn by BTS. It can be categorised as a conceptual video, as there is no narrative nor is the group performing in a concert. In fact, the video may be too conceptual, and fans have been trying to “decode” what the music video means.

In the public forum Quora one fan, Arsha Thapa (2018), said:

I think my favorite part of the MV was when they were dancing in this cage thing and their bigger figures stood up. To me, it meant like they will stand up no matter how many times they fall and that will be something taking them uphill. When their real selves were looking down, to me, it meant that they were looking at their past self that's below them & with those figures, they were saying that they still have a long way to go & that there's always some greater energy looking over them.

Other fans have noted the influence of Africa in the drum beats and images. This was confirmed by J-Hope, one BTS member, who said they intentionally mixed the African dance *gwara gwara* with Korean dance for their performance in the video.



The music video is a mix of many things. There are hints of African (figure 3), Persian (figure 4), and abstraction and kaleidoscopic images of themselves (figure 5 and 6). These are in fact the first three opening sequences that can be seen in the video.



*Figure 3. Opening image of BTS' idol video shows a typical depiction of Africa, with the orange sky and a giraffe in the background*



*Figure 4. Second sequence shows BTS members dancing in front of a structure typical of Persian architecture*



*Figure 5. BTS members are shown in a similar setting as the first sequence, but this time with an abstract sky in the background*



*Figure 6. A kaleidoscopic image of BTS members*

Throughout the video, these sequences interchange with one another and later on at 1:10, one can see the hint of East Asian (figure 7) with the Korean Pavilion (*gyeonghoeru*) showing in the background. One Twitter fan under the username @meovvtan (2018) interpreted the sign on top of the pagoda: “The sign above is '囍', also known as '双喜' (shuang xi) literally translated to ‘double happiness.’ I guess this specific architecture may represent true happiness for them?” Another fan from Aminoapps, with username Light, has interpreted the use of this image as “them accepting their Korean culture.”





*Figure 7. BTS members dancing in a Korean Pavilion*

There were other hints of Korean culture in the music video, including the word “Idol” appearing in the background (Figure 8), the word “love” in the Korean *hangul* (Figure 9), the tiger (Figure 10), and the rabbit and the moon (Figure 11).

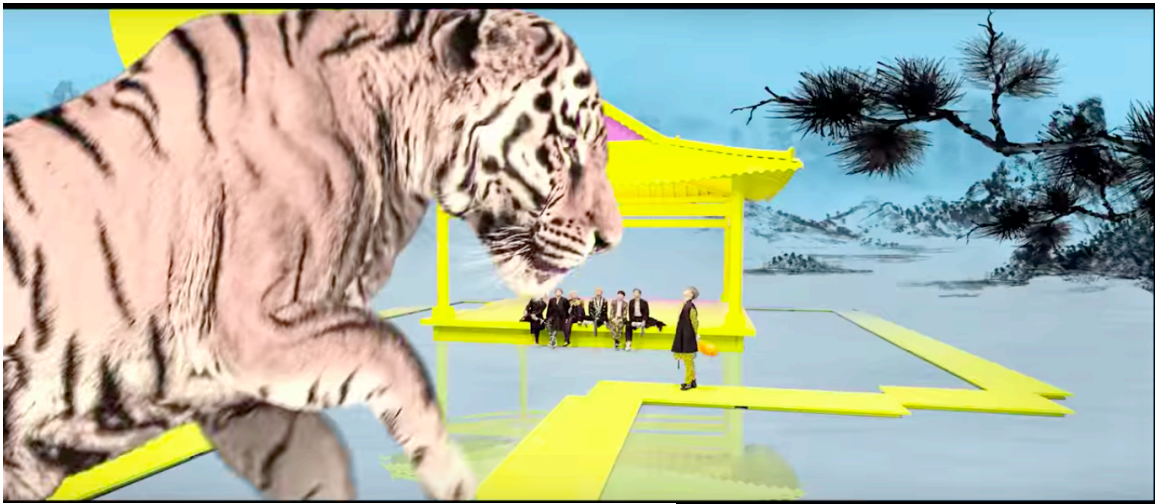
What do these images mean and what are their cultural significance in South Korea? The word “Idol” is an important part of Korea’s pop culture. Idols are used to describe K-pop group members but can also connote celebrities who are “fake.” The tiger is an animal that is considered as a guardian against spirits and bad luck (Kalbi, 2018) and also appears in the Korean myth who gave birth to *Dangun*, the founder of Korea (ibid). Similarly, the rabbit in the moon is a Korean folktale (originating from China) where a god honored the rabbit’s virtue of charity by placing the rabbit on the moon. This legend is popular across other Asian countries and the reason behind the mid-autumn festival.



*Figure 8. The word “idol” appearing in the background*



*Figure 9. The word “love” in Hangul (Korean characters)*



*Figure 10. A white tiger appears in the music video*



*Figure 11. The folklore of the rabbit and the moon also appears in the video*

Additionally, while dancing in the pavilion, BTS members are seen dancing in Korean traditional clothes called durumagi (Figure 12). Durumagi is the overcoat of the hanbok. The durumagi however, was styled to look modern and stylish, pairing it with trousers and shirt (Figure 13).



*Figure 12. Traditional durumagi for men.*  
Source: Leeslee Korea



*Figure 13. BTS is seen dancing while wearing durumagi styled to look more modern*



In the “Idol” music video, it seems that BTS have tried to incorporate music, performance, and visuals that are African and Asian, using more modern style of imagery such as animation and hip-hop dance moves. While there were many hints pertaining to the Korean culture, someone who is not Korean or East Asian would not immediately understand these references, but would immediately be taken by the striking colours and the well-polished dance performance by the members. This is most likely the reason why fans have tried to “decode” the meaning of the video. Notably, Suga (2018), in an interview with The Jakarta Post, said that the incorporation of Korean culture in the music video was not to promote Korean culture but rather a “musical experiment.”

Given that the song, as discussed earlier, has the message of self-love, the video is non-traditional in that it does not directly use the usual images of loving one’s self. Instead, it used Korean cultural references that can be a metaphor for loving their Korean heritage, whether or not this was intentionally done.

The use of African images, beats, and dance moves may have helped the music video in becoming more relatable to fans outside of Korea. The African drum beats and the *gwara gwara* dance moves have also become popular in the West. Shakira used the same elements for her music Waka Waka music video and which Rihanna performed at the 2018 Grammy’s Awards.

On the other hand, there were elements in the music video that would be more relatable to their global fans. There are a series of images that reflect BTS’ members personal experiences that avid fans would know. For example, an image of Namjoon wearing a snapchat filter (Figure 14) and Taehyung wearing a mullet and a pair of glasses (Figure 15). Both Namjoon and Taehyung were criticised by their fans for doing so, as fans thought they didn’t look good. In the video, Namjoon is seen with the snapchat filter while singing the part that goes, “I know what I am, I know what I want, I’m never gonna change” while Taehyung is seen just right after the line “You can’t stop me loving myself.”



Figure 14. Namjoon is seen wearing a snapchat filter



Figure 15. Taehyung is seen wearing a mullet and a pair of glasses

For fans, this music lyrics holds more meaning as the images support BTS members being carefree and accepting themselves for who they are despite criticisms. These images are only relatable insofar as one knows BTS' personal stories of struggle, which closes the distance between them and their fans.

While both the song and the music video are hybrids of Korean/East Asian culture as well as North American and African cultures, the music video shows more traditional Korea than that of the song. While the song had elements of Pansori, the video had multiple images relating to their culture: Korean characters, traditional clothes, a Korean pavilion, the white tiger, and the folklore of the rabbit in the moon. Just like the song, it is more obvious that the music video is not “odourless”, but rather a mishmash of cultures that make it a *mugukjeok*.

### **WHERE IS THE “KOREANNESS” IN BTS?**

Given that there is an obvious hybridity in BTS' branding, song, and music video, one may ask, is there still “Koreanness” in BTS?

Kyung-Koo (2003) writes the history of what is considered “Korean”, starting with the Joseon era when the definition of Korean culture depended on the *yangban* (the elites) who took pride in the Confucianisation of Korea. During the colonization period, the Koreans internalised foreign views of themselves such as pride, obsession with family and hierarchy, show-off, patriarchy, unproductivity, and undisciplined to name a few. Koreans then blamed themselves for the poverty the nation experienced and their inability to modernise. This changed after the military

coup in the 60's where Koreans were now accused of overconfidence and conspicuous consumption. However, this was interpreted positively by scholars and with the help of media campaigns, Korean identity became viewed more positively and helped Korea in its path to economic prosperity.

Park Jung Hee led the modernisation of South Korea, which came to an end in the 1980's and with globalisation in the 1990's, Korea struggled to search for "Koreanness" or their new identity (Ahn, 2013). Today, what is considered "Korean" contains elements borrowed from other cultures (Saeji, 2014) including material and non-material elements such as monuments, buildings, rituals, national holidays. Following Saeji's (2014) definition, what is Korean is no longer just based on how Koreans view themselves, as what Korean scholars have largely written about in the past. For Saeji (2014), memory and tradition help keep this "Koreanness" and repetition helps keeps them alive. For example, presenting a traditional handicraft production in the same way creates memories of how Korean things are made, providing a link to the past and the nation.

Given this new definition of what is Korean, BTS' song and music video definitely show "Koreanness." As was presented earlier, elements of Korean traditional music and clothing, folklore and symbols, as well as traditional architecture was explicit in the music video. Having over 450 million views in YouTube, this has been played over and over again, allowing for that repetition and creation of memory that Saeji (2014) mentions. While BTS members have said that their video does not intentionally promote Korean culture, it does so. The song and the video both provide a link to their nation.

We can then argue that while BTS' global success can be attributed to their hybridity, BTS has still retained their "Koreanness," especially in their song and music video "Idol".

## **NEOLIBERALISM AND CAPITALISM: FORCE BEHIND BTS SUCCESS?**

The beginnings of K-pop's success can be traced following South Korea's democratisation in the late 80's. With better economy and rise of modern technology, the music landscape was changed. Pop artists were produced and other music genres such as hip-hop and R&B were incorporated. K-pop then became a product of consumption for the young and the affluent but at the same time became contentious on issues of cultural identity (Lie, 2014 p.38):

The local appropriation of globalised music styles, such as hip-hop, R&B, reggae, heavy metal, and techno made Korean pop music a modernized, fashionable, and internationally oriented genre that attracted the consumer group of affluent, urban, middle-class youngsters, but it also stirred debates on copying culture and piracy

problems, on musical originality and imitation, and it served as a discursive battlefield for negotiating the notions and boundaries of Korean music, and moreover, of the Korean cultural identity.”

However, the Korean Wave, including K-pop was used by the government to brand South Korea and has made South Korea an “export nation” for pop culture products and formats (Lie, 2014). In fact, BTS itself is worth \$5 billion to the South Korean economy, with about 800,000 tourists choosing South Korea for their destination in 2018 because of BTS (AFP, 2018). BTS has been made tourism ambassadors with the “Live Seoul Like I Do” campaign and have been promoting a list of locations of BTS music video and album covers for people to visit (Suntukil, 2019).

South Korea, through its cultural products like BTS, have exerted “soft power” over countries. The government has recognised the importance of its cultural products. In 2001, then South Korean president Kim Dae-jung mentioned *Hallyu* as part of its economic policy who called it a “chimney-less industry” and subsequently made the goal of making South Korea one of the world’s top five content powers in 2010 (Suntukil, 2019). The government has also founded and funded the Korean Creative Content Agency to support the production of Korean popular culture content.

However, this “hypercommodification” also has an effect on K-pop groups like BTS including the loss of their individual uniqueness (Choi and Maliangkay, 2015).

It is clear that BTS is a large part of South Korea’s economy and their rise to popularity is supported by the South Korean government. They are an asset to the South Korean economy and in shaping the nation’s image. This proves that neoliberalism and capitalism is one of the driving force behind BTS’ success in the global arena. Without the aggressive funding and support from the South Korean government, BTS and other K-pop groups will not have the same success it enjoys today.

## CONCLUSION

BTS has become a global phenomenon and this cannot be denied. This essay wanted to answer the reason behind this — is BTS a *mukokuseki* or a *mugukjeok*? The answer, as I have demonstrated through my analysis, leans towards *mugukjeok*. BTS is a hybrid of different musical and aesthetic influences that makes them neither traditional Korean nor too foreign. This hybridity allows them to connect and be accepted by their fans from different cultures. However, this hybridity doesn’t make them odourless, but rather creates a new musical genre and aesthetic that is distinctly K-pop.

What remains of their “Koreanness”? There surprisingly seems to be a lot, specifically in their music video “Idol.” While in their interviews BTS members have

consistently denied that their music video “Idol” was about promoting South Korean culture, the use of traditional clothes, architecture, and folklore allow it to be linked to the country’s culture. And with their music video played over 450 million times on YouTube, accessible to many countries around the world, “Idol” has become a music video that promotes South Korea’s culture.

But BTS’ success does not exist in a vacuum. The international success they currently enjoy is linked to the country’s economic success and display of “soft power.” With strong support from the South Korean government, K-pop groups like BTS have been led to the global stage, accepted by fans from different parts of the world. This success has helped transform South Korea’s image from that of country struggling to modernise after the war and the IMF crisis to that of a modern, prosperous South Korea. The funding and promotion that BTS has received from the government has allowed BTS to be catapulted to the international music arena, once enjoyed only by artists from the United States and Europe.

Whether or not other K-pop groups will achieve the same level of success as BTS and whether or not BTS will continue in its success remains to be seen. What is clear is that with social media and the Internet, more people are exposed to different cultures, creating cultural hybrids that can be consumed beyond national and cultural borders.



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