

Bangtan Sonyeondan – Success of An Asian Boy Band: A Case Analysis

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ARTICLE INFO

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Published:

20 January 2022

Keywords:

Army, Bangtan
Sonyeondan, Boy Band,
BTS, K-Pop, Marketing
Scheme, South Korea,
Success.

How to Cite:

Ayyappaswamy,
P.. (2021) Bangtan
Sonyeondan – Success
of An Asian Boy Band:
A Case Analysis.
DME Journal of
Management, 2(1), 81-87.
doi: 10.53361/dmejm.
v2i01.10

Abstract

In the 21st Century the world has experienced the K-Pop movement with the biggest boy band in the World BTS. This success could be attributed to the talent of the 7 members of the band, but is it much more? I believe this is a result of the influence of the 'Hallyu wave' i.e. the popularity of Korean Actors and Singers popularly known as 'Idols'. Why is an Island in the East able to influence the faster paced Western world, with people around the world rapping to Korean lyrics, Hangul a Language not spoken by more than 75 Million People around the world? The reasons for such success could be attributed to a multitude of reasons and the author would like to focus on how a successful marketing scheme could help developing artists with talent to conquer the world. It is said that BTS bring in about 3.2 Billion Dollars in Revenue for South Korea annually, how is this possible? Sometimes, Humility goes a long way in reaching people's hearts than arrogance, perhaps the western world was impressed by the Korean humility. Be it what may, the primary objective of this article is to delve into the reasons that led to this band's juggernaut into the bill-board charts creating history for Asia and South-Korea.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st Century the United States has been the major power when it came to producing quality artists who amassed global stardom, this could be attributed to a superior outreach when compared with its Asian & European counterparts (Kim, vol. 60, no. 5.). Since, English was a language more commonly spoken by most, the shift in popular cultural following from Non-English Music originating from Europe to English language was observed. This effect was in particular dominant in the audio-visual industry. This phenomenon was set to continue until, the Korean Pop Culture challenged these perceptions (Kim, vol. 60, no. 5.). This article will tackle the reasons for the Popularity of the Korean wave and the author believes it to be a threefold – The Digital Networks, The K-Pop Industry and the Fandom.

The Hallyu Wave

Towards the late 1990s Korea Based Products such as their films, Music and Drama had begun to emerge not only in their domestic markets but also in the

international market. Although this phenomenon was alluded to be temporary by the western critics as an 'unsustainable fad' it has from then, gained attention in several countries due to its films receiving more International Attention and Awards and the Traction that Korean Pop videos attract in You Tube (Kim H. J., 2019). What was only once covered in East and South Asian countries now, Korean Drama has also been exported to more countries (Jin, 2016). The Government provides 1% of its Annual Budget to promote Korean Culture. The Hallyu wave has emerged as a soft power for Korea to increase tourism and promote Korean Culture (Park, 2021).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The author is a firm believe in a successful marketing strategy being able to achieve and reach even the most difficult of people. The author has researched on several aspects of the Korean Culture, Media and K-Pop to write this Case Study. The author in her review would like to make notable mentions of a few sources she drew inspiration to pen this case study. Kim Hae Joo's "Dreaming High With K-Pop: Pop Empire" a 2019 research paper published in The University of Hawaii made me think about the Biggest Boy Band in the World BTS. How is it possible for an Asian Band to Beat the Western People in a Market that was wholly dominated by western artists? Secondly, the Use of K-Pop as a soft power to rise in Prestige by South Korea aptly described in Jin's "New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media" published in the University of Illinois Press, a 2016 research paper inspired the author to read more about BTS in Bill Board articles, scan through their Interview and also study the Successful marketing strategies that have been employed. Other than Journals she has referred to several Books by Popular Korean authors which have been translated to English. She has used Media Sources to Research on the Boy Band as such entities operate a lot on Social Media.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Research Methodology is in the form of doctrinal Research, wherein the Secondary Sources used to

collect information is through Newspaper, Research articles, K-Pop Trivia, Fan Articles, Interviews etc. The Author has strictly adhered to the topic not expressing personal opinions but expressed her observations on the topic and what alludes to the success of the K-Pop Band. This case study exposes the K-Pop industry for what it is and the reasons for it garnering such success with specific analysis on the International Phenomena i.e. BTS. Every industry needs a market to thrive but what is the way to find that market is one of the questions answered in this paper. Is the Korean Industry dealing with People? Or Commodifying their artists for media sales? These are questions that are raised in many issues and reports but the author has stuck to the question on what has made the Hallyu wave so effective in attracting an active International fan base.

Research Objectives

The research aims to present the Reasons for the humongous success of the Asian Pop Band, how they Came about, inclusive of the aspects of a successful marketing strategy. Further the research aims to present nuances that could provide a more ideal view on the strategy involved in taking the talent further.

- They say however, talented you might be you need an ideal manager to take you the distance, and in this case, Bang Si Hyuk is the man behind the Band. The Author would firstly focus on the marketing strategy involved.
- Secondly, move on to what is known as the 'Hallyu Wave' & The K-Pop Scene in Korea and how this craze could have furthered the Bands Success, and lastly, the interesting collaborations the Band has undertaken will be discussed. The Korean Government's huge support towards the Entertainment scene in Korea would be discussed in this case study analysis.

The Beginning Early Marketing Strategy

BTS had debuted on June 13, 2013 and the performance in the initial days focused majorly on Hard Core Hip-Hop music. The Band in its early days went on to upload video content which were called "Video Blogs" and their rehearsal practices "to generate

band awareness and increase popularity". Initially, the music did not mesh with the tastes of the Average Korean music purchaser of that time. Also, The Record Label which BTS signed with was called as "Big Hit" and it signed another Hip-Hop Band called Glam, a five women Girl Group in June 2012 (Messerlin, 2017). There was a scandal in relation to one of the Female Members "blackmailing a Leading Korean Actor called Lee Byung-Hun". "The guilty ruling in the court case which followed this scandal had put Big Hit under scrutiny and was blacklisted by several media outlets". Such an incident created "a difficult environment" for Big Hit to promote its talent i.e. the "Singers and other Artists". Thus, in the initial stages it can be observed that BTS songs such as "Sea" was only available on "Physical Album", most fans would be aware that this is also the second hidden track most often played in their love yourself music anthem (Jung, 2015). Thus, in their early days Media Coverage for BTS was very limited. They had notably described these difficulties they faced in a song "Move" which released in 2015 (Kim J., 2007).

Then, BTS initially enjoyed breakthrough and commercial success in the Chinese and Japanese Market towards 2015, their genre of music had also shifted from hip-hop to being more inclusive of other genres. When it comes to music, their music videos and songs started taking in more meaningful contexts with multi-layered narratives and thought-provoking lyrics (Lee, 2019). They say BTS music can only be sung by BTS as it was borne out of experience and difficulty that they faced during their debut (Lee, 2019). The Diplomatic Relations that China had with Korea had turned sour towards the end of 2015 and thus, a decrease in streaming and commercialisation of K-Pop was observable. It was during this crisis that turned BTS to the US Music Industry, there were several earlier players in the K-Pop Industry huge Entertainment Biz such as JYP, SM Town, YG but it is notable that Big Hit an up and coming Start Up with a tarnished beginning to make an effective use of this opportunity (Porter, 1990).

The Social Message

The Band is a serious phenomenon but it does not take itself too seriously, perhaps, that is the allure. As one of the members of the group Suga has said,

"There were things that needed to be said but no one did it." As the author notes their lyrics are catchy but their Fans are people who were looking for the relatability factor. In the 21st Century Metal Health is focused upon and talked upon unlike yester years and they found their link with the fans with their lyrics which focused on Mental Health (Parc, Orientaliska Studier) At each point in their career BTS Songs have been about what the Band or Individual Members have struggled through at a particular period of time. That coupled with the demeanour, you have to practice what you preach, thus, their Humble image, such as Jimin's Bow making front page in a gesture to thank fans for the popularity of BTS "Permission to Dance" making it to Bill Board No. 1 (Jin, 2016). For Instance, in August D: The Last Suga sings about Mental Illness in a very frank manner. Other Acts in K-Pop were quite reluctant to venture into Mental Health, when BTS did (Railton, 2019). Also, Koreans themselves are very reluctant to address stress and Mental Wellbeing related issues.

The Success Factor

The Band was formed in 2010 had its debut in the 2013. "The Seven Member Band has been on Seven World Tours released three concert movies in cinemas all over the world". "BTS has been awarded the Order of Cultural Merit" owing their International Success and their help in bringing the Korean Culture to the forefronts in the 21st Century (Railton, 2019). And when it comes to discussing their Success the accepts of creation of Music needs to be discussed. BTS has shaped itself in the "Idol culture" of K-Pop which involves attractive members who are fashionable and trained in Singing and Dancing (Parc J. &, 2019). They are usually part of a successful record label which enforces strict rules on them as trainees and later launches them with musical videos which are colourful featuring powerful dance sequences (Fiske, 2010). This Regime has not only found success in Korea but also around the world. BTS has however broken away from the Traditional Mould of an Idol Group and Continues to evolve.

The Distributors

Firstly, creating a music video is more than just the music. There are several activities involved



behind it to make it successful and popular such as (a) Creating Appealing Music, (b) Being able to distribute it more widely so it might attain more fan base, (c) How to ensure what is distributed it being bought / Consumed efficiently, is something a manager or producer needs to look into when deciding upon the avenues to launch videos (McLaren, 2019). Thus, the success of the Band can be attributed to: The distributors, Producers, Consumers and Concept. South Korean Soft Power export is more predominantly seen in its gaming industry this is followed by the Idol Music Culture that South Korea seems to promote (Moon, 2016).

The Fandom

The music industry had by far seen “fans” to be passive consumers but fans becoming active creators is something that is very new. BTS attributes its success to its fans whom they collectively call “The ARMY” (Chang, 2019). For, BTS it is not the Artist that they have created but the Fandom that they gave generated. The Fans as active collaborators have contributed a lot to the growth of the Band. BTS was the most tweeted Act in the US, and ARMY was responsible for this Feet. ARMY are the Adorable Representative MC of The Youth, however saccharine the name might be they have generated over 6 billion views and 40 Million Subscribers for BTS on YouTube (Jenkins, 2003). “BTS” is not “the first K-Pop Band” that has taken initiative in “Fan Building”, most Idol Groups in Korea are based on that Model but BTS has emerged as one of the most consistent in building a lasting Fan Base (Lewis, 1992).

WeVerse was developed by a Big Hit Subsidiary, and fans had to pay membership fees to talk to their favourite artists. They could attend concerts during the pandemic, learn Korean with BTS and spend at shops which sells merchandise inclusive of water which is overpriced (Lewis, 1992). After BTS success on WeVerse several other Korean A-Listers from Other Labels are also seen on WeVerse. WeVerse observes about 1.4 Million Daily Users (Moon H. C., 2016).

Big Hit

Big Hit Music was called earlier as “Big Hit Entertainment” was a “South Korean Entertainment

Company” and was “Established by Bang-Si-Hyuk”, “the master mind” behind the success of BTS (Jenkins, 2003). Its parent company is the Hybe Corporation, Hybe also has substantial stake in the US Music Industry after a successful takeover of Ithaca Holdings which manages Global Pop Sensations such as Ariana Grande, Justin Bieber etc. This marks a revolution not only in the Korean Entertainment Scene but also Globally as Hybe has transcended the norm for a Korean Management Company. It can be said the Competition for Hybe Entertainment is not The Other Korean Entertainment Companies such as SM, YG or JYP but rather Korea’s Naver (Parc J. , 2018) . Earlier it was impossible to even imagine an Entertainment Agency competing with Korea’s Top Search Engine in terms of Revenue and Views (Fiske, 2010). Recent announcements also allude to Big Hit investments in YG and a co-operation with Naver to improve fan-based platforms.

Idol-Culture & Sasaeng

The term “*Idol*” refers to “a celebrity” working in the K-Pop field either “as a member of a group or as a soloist”. The K-Pop idols usually debut under a mainstream Entertainment Agency after undergoing a rigorous training stage as a trainee under the same label of the Agency (Lee M. , 2019). They have “a carefully curated public image and social media presence”. “The Idols dedicate a lot of time in building relationships with Fans through concerts and Fan Meets”. When Trainees debut, they are usually given a pleasing persona to play created by the management agency, they have to maintain this image in Public (Kim J. , 2007).

It is observable that the Entertainment Companies in Korea market their artists as brands not just the music but the artists themselves are viewed as products. This could be attributable to the number of trainees who join these companies or the mass number of auditions that are held to filter people. These companies work “to broaden their audience as the domestic recognition or fandom” is not enough “to pull the profits that the Entertainment Agencies” usually aim for. This marketing as formed a central part of K-Pop genre and the Industry Profits (Lee J. H., 2013).

K-Pop Idols enjoy fans who are active and participative in their life, they share a kind of kinship with their fans, but this can also border over obsession as they live in a two edged world, firstly they share a lot of aspects of their life to broaden their fan base and this at times turns against them as what they share creates a range of obsessive fans (Elfvig-Hwang, 2018). The question is, an Idol shares what they want and need not go beyond what they want to share, but this message can be lost in translation. A Sasaeng Fan is someone who engages in activities which constitute an invasion of the privacy of the celebrity. It has been observed that these fans are mostly 13-22 and at times prone to committing crimes to obtain the attention of their obsession. This has been one of the negative developments of the K-Pop culture and its Fandom (Fiske, 2010). It is reported that this phenomenon was in existence even before the digital era, "first generation K-Pop bands" such as "H.O.T" and "G.O.D" have also been victims of such harassment (Williamson, (2011)).

The Members

The BTS is an Idol group consisting of Seven Members and in Many Interviews the Band itself, has stated that Seven is their lucky numbers and having a Seven Member Band works well in live performance and in Dance Choreography (Foong). The Eldest member of the Idol Group is Jin, followed by the other members Six, Suga, J-Hope, RM, Jimin, V and Jungkook. Each member of the Band has a unique role in shaping the Kind of music BTS has to produce. Suga, J-Hope and RM are the rappers in the Band but this is obvious because earlier BTS was intended to be a Hip-Hop Crew with RM as the first find of Bang-Si-Hyuk, but it was later made into a K-Pop Band after new finds with more Idol like quality like V, Jungkook, Jimin. BTS has several prominent endorsements, it is the first male pop group to sign with Dior, they also have endorsements with Louis Vuitton (Yang, 2012). Several Korean Brands such as Hyundai, Samsung have BTS represent them. It is a batch of Pride for the Nation. V, is popularly called as Gucci Boy although he does not personally represent the brand. They represent a symbol of luxury, but still relate to their mainstream audience and the originality with which the Band Started has

still not been lost. BTS has several collaborations, including one with McDonald's which sells a BTS Meal over 50 Countries. It is often said that if BTS uses a particular brand the armies usually buyout a particular item, and this is very true. That is the Brand Power of BTS, and maybe Hit Man Bang has managed to successfully create a Pop Group which has more value and influence than just their songs. So, to call BTS a mere pop sensation would be downplaying the band (Aniftos, 2017).

The Albums & Sales

BTS is the most successful Korean Act as of now. These are tough footsteps for any other K-Pop player to beat. BTS is the second Band after the Beatles to release three number one albums in less than one year, and they continue to grow (R. Hilton, 2010). The Band Members state that it is the people that they met who have shaped their career so far, and the fact that they have achieved this at a very young age is what makes the band completely unique. Five of BTS songs have featured as No. 1 on the US Billboard Chart, eight within the Top 10 Hits and 22 Singles have broken the Hot 100 since 2017. BTS is the First Asian Boy Band to achieve such a feat (Smiles, n.d.).

Philanthropy

BTS and Big Hit in their "Love Myself Campaign" have raised about \$ 2.98 Million Globally for UNICEF", in order "to end violence against children and young people". To further this agenda, they have helped "adolescents and young adults all over the world to open up about their experiences". BTS has also "addressed heads of state and the World Leaders" at the "Annual United Nations General Assembly Meeting in New York", they have "released music videos also supporting UNICEF's campaign" (UNICEF, 2018, "We have learned to love ourselves, so now I urge you to "speak yourself"." UNICEF. September 24., 2018). They strongly abhor violence and bullying and booths at music concerts are a constant to raise awareness amongst the ARMY to protect themselves and each other from such harm. BTS and members such as J-Hope have both as a group and individually donated for worthwhile initiatives, it is more surprising that the Label Big Hit has also stood with the Band in all these decisions.



Notably, “BTS and Big Hit donated \$1 Million to Black Lives Matter”, this was “one of the largest celebrity checks” after “the unfair death of George Floyd” as a result of racial crime, by the Police themselves. This was matched by the group’s fans within a 24-hour time period (Kwak, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Thus, it could be said that the reasons for BTS success could be a culmination of being “at the right place at the right time” and, “the Hallyu wave” and Hit Man Bangs successful creation of the Band and the Image of the Band as a Brand itself. But the main reason the author has found owing to the Bands Global presence is the subject of their music (Lee J. , 2018). Many K-Pop Idol Music focuses on the ability to attract viewers and focus on subjects such as relationship, love, attraction etc, but BTS stands out like a beacon and covers songs on topics such as bullying, elitism and mental health.

Theoretical Contributions

Through this article the author has wished to identify the several points wherein the Korean music or K-Pop in particular had operated and which also helped in bolstering BTS success and growth as one of the most successful boy bands in the world. I have helped in piecing together diverse factors which help in fostering talent. Perhaps this research can help in identifying factors which can help similar industrial growth and empowerment.

Marketing Implications

The author through her research on K-Pop and Korean Entertainment Regime has found that it survives on successful marketing on both the domestic and International Level. The Korean Entertainment Industry has shown significant development through government support and talented managers who tone younger talent. Perhaps this model of utilising young talent and honing Individual talent at a very young age, should not be curtailed to a single market. If a similar approach of managing talent was taken in India with regards to different Industries, I believe we can observe significant growth. The Author has analysed

the growth of BTS in particular due to their ability both the talent and the managers in successfully breaking through barriers.

Policy Implications

These are topics which South Koreans themselves do not feel comfortable broaching upon. Thus, their ability to be relatable to a wider audience is borne out of this fact and the humility they show while still being entertaining is what has taken the Act places. So, the aim in writing this case study was to expose the challenges the band had to go through and those challenges itself making up as successful marketing methods. Once a fan base is made which was created by earlier K-Pop Entities it became easier for BTS to make a stint which was the first of its kind and very well received in the western markets. A positive approach to celebrities on a particular country makes people trust more in a nation and Idol or K-Pop culture is a fanatic fan base which encourages followers to be devoted to their Idols this makes these fans devoted to Korea too thus, bolstering International Tourism. There are many benefits that K-Pop has involuntarily or perhaps created by chance which was not the original intention in making up these entities. The author believes that Media, Movies, Music and The Hallyu wave has positive Influences for Korea and acts as a soft power to attract potential Investments for Korea. Thus, it is a story of how successful marketing strategies are elements of social change.

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