

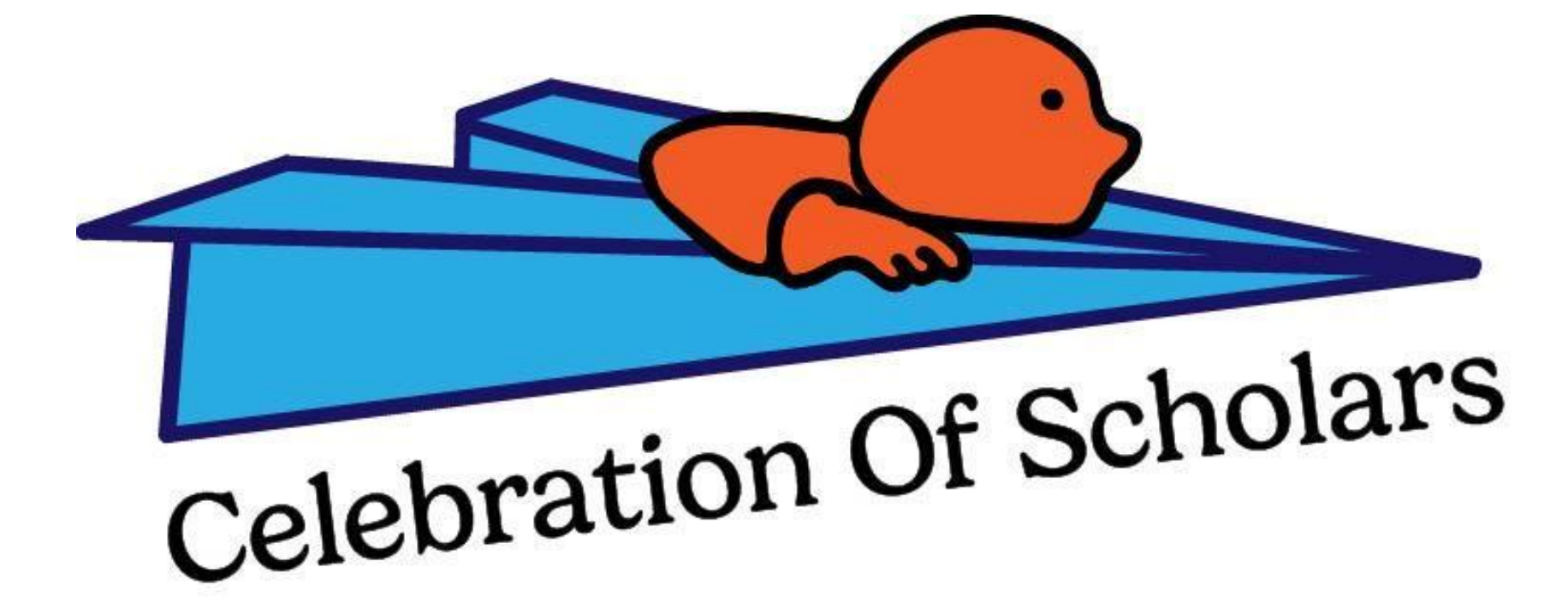


Will You Be My Friend?: How K-Pop Expanded Into the United States

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Abstract

This thesis examines the history of Korean Pop (K-Pop) to define strategies industry leaders utilized to expand the market of K-Pop music in the United States. The researcher analyzes existing studies to identify four main tactics: multi-domestic and transnational marketing strategies and persistent usage of social media to create awareness of the genre and to cultivate strong fan loyalty. This thesis also applies the Uses and Gratifications theory to examine why these strategies aided in successful market expansion. The researcher examines how the industry meeting audience’s needs of surveillance, cultural transmission, entertainment, and social interaction enabled people to gain interest in K-Pop; this maintained interest allows the industry to expand its market as companies gain and sustain money, public attention, and fans. This thesis reveals the importance of figuring out how to inform an audience of a foreign industry’s existence and, in turn, gain an engaged audience and a place in international markets. As the world becomes increasingly connected, this thesis provides an example of how future industries can use similar tactics when introducing a foreign business or concept to other countries across the globe.

Uses & Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications theory asserts the general public actively chooses the media they consume and continue to interacted with it based on how well it meets their needs. The four needs in this research are defined as surveillance, cultural transmission, entertainment, and social interaction. In surveillance, audiences seek out media to gain information and knowledge. In cultural transmission, audiences consume media to understand their own and others’ cultures; media is used to understand and create cultural and social norms. As for entertainment, audiences interact with media to relieve tension and act as a form of escapism from routine, daily life. Lastly, in social interaction media is used to socialize with others as a way to feel like part of a collective. This theory serve as a basis for interpreting reasons why certain strategies for expansion were successful and others unsuccessful.

Multi-Domestic Marketing

In multi-domestic marketing, a company adapts to each country’s preferences of the market they are trying to enter. In some cases, the product in the new country is vastly different to its existence in its native one. During the early 2000s, artists such as BoA and Rain were first to try to break into the U.S. music industry, and tried to adapt to the industry's preference of singers performing in English with the release of English collaborations, singles, and albums. They also followed traditional U.S. music promotion schedules in appearing on late night television and in various American movies. Rain and BoA had success as BoA debuted on Billboard 200, a chart measuring the most popular albums in the U.S. a week at a time, and Rain went on to be on the list of Time Magazine’s 100 Most Influential People in 2006. Ultimately, they failed at reaching audience’s surveillance and cultural transmission needs because Americans did not understand what made the K-Pop industry from their own and artists struggled with English proficiency.

Transnational Marketing

The transnational approach is similar in catering to countries’ local preferences but different in that companies also keep their signature specialties. In the late 2000s, groups like the Wonder Girls and 2NE1 tried their hand at this tactic. They adapted to the U.S industry by creating English singles and albums as artists before them did, but their main success came as a result of taking songs from their Korean discography and recording them in English for U.S. releases – keeping to their K-Pop roots while also adapting to local preferences. As a result, the Wonder Girls made history becoming the first song by Korean artists to debut on Billboard Top 100, a chart measuring the most popular songs in the U.S. a week at a time, at number 76 while 2NE1’s album *Crush* reached 61 on Billboard’s Top 200 and became the highest charting K-Pop album of its time despite having no English singles. It is also important to note both the Wonder Girls and 2NE1 had multiple members who could speak fluent English as a result of living in English-speaking countries – the importance of English fluency seemingly noted after BoA and Rain’s struggles.

With this approach, the industry effectively satisfied audience’s needs for surveillance and cultural transmission.

Social Media Awareness

In 2012, the idea of K-Pop was synonymous with PSY’s “Gangnam Style” as it became the most viewed music video ever on YouTube and kept that title until 2016. PSY’s success with Gangnam Style and other hits, “Gentleman” and “Daddy,” relied heavily on the usage of social media in order to expand the songs, and therefore the genre, into the United States and other countries. With the emergence of technology and music streaming services, the general public was given more access to determine what became popular – allowing for international music industries to break into the U.S. market. K-Pop companies signed contracts with American platforms such as YouTube and Google in order to have their music advertised. The usage of these platforms made K-Pop music and promotional content way more accessible to American consumers than traditional avenues, which increased the general public’s awareness of the genre. This best satisfied audience’s needs for surveillance and cultural transmission while also bringing in the entertainment aspect as people could look to elaborate music videos to escape from their daily lives.

Cultivating Fan Loyalty

K-Pop companies also utilized social media to create stronger connections between artists and consumers. Idols often use platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and more to talk about their day-to-day schedules and to create a sense of closeness with their fans. Bang Si-hyuk, founder of Big Hit Entertainment and mind behind the creation of the group BTS, credits “loyalty built through direct contact with fans” as a major part of the formula allowing BTS to gain fame in the U.S. (Bruner, 2019).

Fan loyalty unlocks the need of social interaction as fans look to connect with and support one another as they create friendships based on mutual interests in their favorite group; this concept is most apparent in the practice of purchasing albums. In 2023, groups Seventeen and Stray Kids broke the record for most pre-ordered albums of the genre. When this achievement was first announced, fans of both groups trended hashtags on Twitter celebrating, and both fan groups went on to buy more albums as result of the increased media coverage and the want for bragging rights.

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