

The Role of New Media in the International Transmission of Korean Pop Culture

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Abstract: South Korea has always taken cultural export as a strategy to improve the country's economic development, and Korean wave culture has gradually gained greater influence in the world. In recent years, the Korean idol group BTS has made the popularity of Korean wave culture reach a new level. This paper will take BTS as an example to analyze the important role of new media in the development of popular culture, and provide effective ways for other Korean entertainment companies to promote their groups

1. Introduction

In recent years, Republic of Korea (South Korea) attaches great importance to the development of its cultural industry, and gradually takes cultural export as the main method of national development and prosperity. So far, South Korea's cultural export strategy has achieved great success, becoming the fifth largest country in the world's cultural output. Their cultural industry drives the economic development of South Korea.

Among them, K-pop, which refers to pop music originated from South Korea, is becoming more and more popular among the younger generations. In recent years, the debut of the K-pop group BTS, which stands for Bulletproof Boys Scouts, has promoted the “Korean wave” culture, which refers to the regional influence of Korean TV series, movies, music and other entertainments, to the global market, spreading the “Korean wave” from the East Asian cultural circle to the Middle East, Europe and the United States. This article will start with the international influence of BTS under the background of multimedia and analyze the important role of new media in the international communication of Korean wave culture. Therefore, implications for other K-pop companies to promote their idol groups to the west would be provided.

2. Literature Review

With the continuous development of BTS, K-pop's position in the overseas music market has risen to a new historical height. BTS appeared on the cover of Time magazine's “The Next Generation of Leaders” and was named as “the 100 Most Influential People in the World in 2019”. The BBC called it “the 21st Century Beatles”.

In addition, BTS was the first Asian artist group to drop on the Billboard 200 in the first week of album release, the first Asian double winner of the Billboard Awards, and the first Korean artist to be invited to present the Grammy awards. BTS's management company BigHit has also achieved successful development, completely breaking the monopoly of the market by three major entertainment companies in South Korea- - SM, JYP, YG. However, in 2013, there were 25 male bands that made their debut with BTS in the same year, and so far 23 of them have disbanded. Moreover, the large Korean companies and famous artists who tried to enter the European and American markets in the past have come to the conclusion that “the European and American pop music market is the grave of foreign musicians”. Under such harsh conditions, BTS has become the only K-pop group that really breaks into the European and American markets so far. This makes people start to wonder why BTS is so popular among western countries.

Chinese scholar Qimeng Zong (2020) believes that the international communication of Korean wave culture driven by BTS is the result of seizing the chance of fast information transmission in

the era of online media. At the same time, hip-hop-based music style of BTS is in line with the popular trend of European and American music in recent years, well connected with the international market. In the recently released album “Map of the soul: 7”, BTS collaborated with many famous European and American pop singers, such as Sia, Troye Sivan. It not only captures the existing groups of fans, but also explores the international market, making K-pop further get into the international pop music circle. Korean culture has therefore reached a wider international audiences.

Nevertheless, some scholars believe that the reason why BTS is more outstanding than traditional K-pop groups is that they use music to convey their positive values and criticize the secular world. Nissen (2016) stated that while the other boy bands insisted on singing songs about love and heartbreak, BTS infused plenty of social criticism and introspection into their lyrics when the CEO of Bighit-Bang Si-hyuk- encouraged the members to tell personal stories freely. This is also the reason why the fans like their music.

This study would clarify the most popular topics among the discussion about BTS on Twitter in western countries (US and UK), and seek the reason why BTS is more successful in western music market compared to other Korean idol groups. Accordingly, I ask the following research questions and propose the following hypotheses:

-RQ1. Why is BTS attractive in western countries ?

-RQ2. What are the most popular topics among the discussion about BTS on Twitter in western countries?

-H1. Western countries prefer BTS (positive/negative/neutral) due to the fact that they produce their albums themselves, not because of other aspects (produce albums themselves/their appearance/their music styles/their MV concepts)

-H2. If a tweet contains secondary fan work, it will attract more followers

3. Method

Data collection: On Crimson Hexagon, a third-party data platform that provides firehouse's full data, I searched BTS/bts/bangtan from Twitter users in US and UK in the period of 2015-2016.

Measurements: The codebook consists of six items. The first item asks about whether the tweets are relevant to BTS. The categories are relevant and irrelevant. The second item asks about the topics the tweets are about, and it includes MV concepts, Music, Live performance, TV shows, Appearance, Awards, Photo, fashion and Other. The third item asks about whether the tweets are about the albums. The categories are about the albums and not about the albums. The fourth item asks about the aspects if the message has mentioned the album, and it includes mentioned the members' involvement and not mention the member's involvement. The fifth item asks about the attitude towards the albums, and the categories are positive, negative, and neutral. The sixth item asks about whether this message contain secondary fan work; The categories are contain the secondary fan work and not.

Data analysis: Qualitative strategy analysis will be used to answer RQ1. Descriptive analysis will be used to answer RQ2. Plus, crosstabs and chi-square are used to test H1. This paper will also use t-test to examine H2.

4. Findings

To answer RQ1, the following part analyzes the marketing strategies Bighit used to promote BTS.

A review of each of BTS's albums reveals that BTS, like all the other Korean idol groups, has made significant changes to adapt to the market with every comeback.

The difference is that most idol groups change their music style and appearance with a bit of a lag, but BTS has been very responsive to the changing trends of the market. For example, the old school concept in the album Love Yourself. SM entertainment was the first to use this element, but Bighit was also quick to capture the trend and incorporate it into its work. Besides, each album not

only borrows and adds pop elements, but also innovates on this basis, without affecting the work's high quality and maintaining its distinctive features.

Along with good production and nurturing, BigHit has taught BTS members strategies of communicating with fans all the time, and this has gradually become daily routines of their fans. With no effective platform to promote the group, BigHit had to capitalize the only media left for them: Twitter. BigHit decided to let all seven members of BTS use the same Twitter account, something no one had ever done before. Four years later, the account has become the most active fan base in the world, continuously breaking Twitter world records. This strategy may have been a decision made out of desperation, but it became a platform to help BTS to further develop in the future, and made BTS's fan base extremely active and unique.

Nowadays, BTS is becoming worldwide famous. They continue to use their online platforms to maintain their fans. Several approaches have been taken. For example, BTS has an active twitter and YouTube account, as well as weekly homemade shows. BigHit encourages members to connect with fans as friends and family. And those funny homemade shows can keep fans paying attention to BTS. In addition, BigHit takes Vlive very seriously. In 2015, when VAPP was just launched, BTS decided to cooperate with Vapp and launched a series of variety shows with Vapp, The groups members often interact with fans all over the world on Vapp, thus growing into the group with the most followers on Vapp. When they were not capable of participating in larger music, they already have a huge influence on the internet. Moreover, BigHit keeps an eye on the expectations and thoughts of its fans. In October 2017, when BTS has more than 9 million twitter followers, BigHit launched an online questionnaire that has 29 pages. This questionnaire has many versions of different languages, which allowed BigHit to deeply understand the fans' gender, age, consumption habits and preferences. What's more, on the last page of the questionnaire is a survey of a person's character. So BigHit could get big data from fans around the world and analyze it, combining it with its expertise in new media marketing.

When they debuted, the relentless efforts of BigHit and BTS in new media have kept BTS out of the glare of the market. And as they become more and more famous, almost no one can stop their success, because they already have their own platform and do not have to rely on other programs to show themselves.

In terms of RQ2, I found that photo, MV concepts, and TV shows are the most popular topics in the tweets. Also, 29% of the tweets focus on other topics, including their personalities, private lives, interviews, fan sign, etc. For example, one tweet talks about the underrated nature of one BTS member.

As for H1, none of the tweets mention members' involvement. However, among the 7 tweets mentioning albums, 100% of them are positive.

To test H2, I conducted a t-Test and found no significant result ($t=0.727$, $p=0.469>0.05$), meaning that whether or not containing secondary fan work does not influence the number of followers.

5. Discussion

In conclusion, I found that the success of BTS is largely the result of BigHit's emphasis on building close relationship between idols and fans. This makes the fandom of BTS incredibly active.

Since the most popular topics among the discussion about BTS on Twitter in western countries are photo, MV concepts, and TV shows, the following part is going to analyze the reason behind this fact. Firstly, the photos of BTS members mainly show their working conditions and daily life, which are of great interest to their fans. Plus, many of the clothes they wore in the photos were sponsored by some famous brands, for example, Gucci. In addition, MV concepts are always popular among their fans. This is because their MV contains a complete story line, and each member would play a role in the MV to show the audience the rebellious, sad and other emotions of the youth. This gives the fans unlimited recognition for their albums and an emotional connection to this group. Fans always discuss and analyze the stories behind every scene. Hence, this has become

one of the most popular topics about BTS. Moreover, their TV shows also receive lots of attention. Even though they have become international stars, they still tell lots of jokes in TV shows, which makes their shows distinctive. At the same time, these shows show their daily lives that are similar to normal people, and the sharp contrast makes fans intrigued.

As to the reason why we do not have any tweets about members' album involvement and secondary fan work, firstly, we only collected 100 samples. If we expand to a larger sample, there would be more relevant information for the study. Besides, BTS also have accounts on other platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram. Hence, next step is to explore more information about BTS on other platforms.

From my perspective, for other K-pop companies, lots of change should be taken into the consideration according to the marketing strategy of BigHit. First of all, instead of taking their fans' love for granted, they should pay more attention to communication between idols and fans. This is helpful to enhance the activity and enthusiasm of fans, since a stable fanbase is important for the development of a K-pop groups. What's more, when making music, they should incorporate the elements of the current trend on the basis of the original style. This would make more people interested in the groups and look forward to the next album they produce.

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