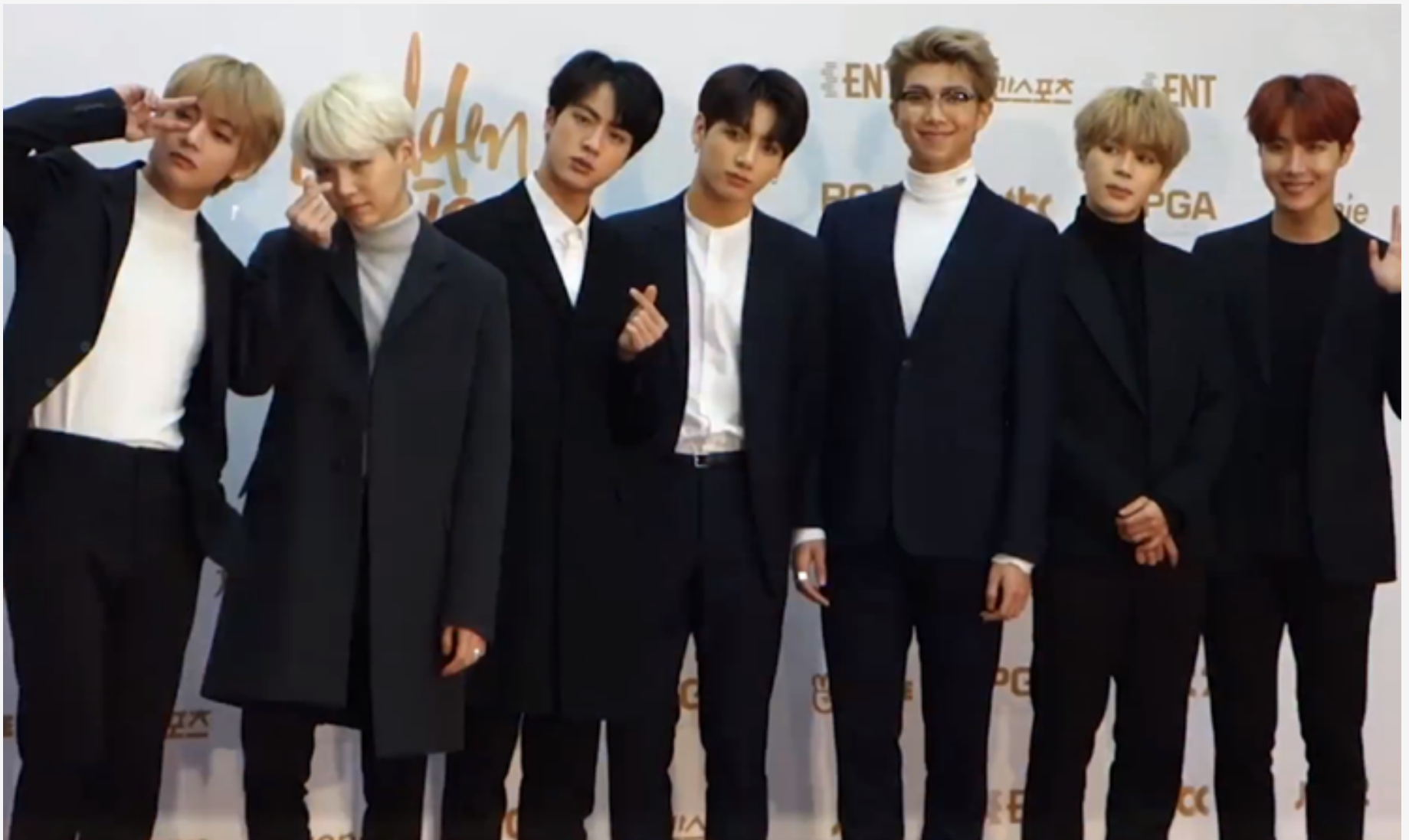




AT LIFE K-POP

MAY 17, 2019



Korean boy band BTS at the 32nd Golden Disc Awards on January 10, 2018. Photo: Wikipedia

Gender and genre: BTS versus Blackpink

Korean boy bands are subverting gender stereotypes; Korean girl groups are reinforcing them

As any inhabitant of planet earth with access to a computer or TV will have noted, boy band BTS and girl group Blackpink are seismically moving and shaking the global music scene, surfing a tidal wave of K-pop as it crashes upon global shores.

The exposure of the two supergroups recently sky-rocketed to ever greater heights when, one after the other, they smashed YouTube records of “Most Viewed Clips in the first 24 Hours.” Blackpink was first with “Kill This Love” – ringing up 56.7 million views. Barely 24 hours later, BTS shattered that number, raising it by 20 million views, with “Boys with Luv.”

Both have also performed on massive American stages – Saturday Night Live for BTS and the Coachella music festival for Blackpink.



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So has K-pop as a genre truly gone global? Or is it simply that, as the world goes gaga over the Bantang Boys, BTS is dragging Blackpink in its foaming wake?



Sorry Blackpink, but...

The two groups come from the same place and are often mentioned in the same breath. But when it comes to sales, the chasm between them is glaring.

In 2019, Blackpink's EP *Kill This Love* broke the record for the highest first-day sales for a girl group album with 78 275 copies sold, according to Hanteo. Compare that to BTS: The Bantang Boys pre-sold 2.6 million copies of their latest album *Map of the Soul : Persona*, according to Billboard.

BTS is also a phenomenon in a way that Blackpink just are not.

On Wednesday night, BTS paid homage to pop gods The Beatles – who they've been compared to repeatedly in terms of their effect on fans, and in the transformative power of pop culture – when they appeared on *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert. Their performance there deliberately mirrored the Fab Four's world-shaking appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964.



While Blackpink might be garnering YouTube views by the million and filling concert hall seats by the tens of thousands, they cannot compare with the thunderous buzz that surrounds BTS – who are, arguably the biggest band in the world today and the biggest Asian act of modern times.



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Of course, this is nothing new in the music world. Some acts were always more popular than others and this has never stopped a genre from having massive success.

But there is a boy band-girl group undertone to the BTS-Blackpink dynamic, and on the gender-expectation front, Blackpink have limited room for manoeuvre. That is not the case with BTS and other Korean boy bands, who are turning Asian and global norms of “masculinity” on their heads.

K-pop or gay-pop?

“How do we blur gender norms?” asked Michael Hurt, a professor of Cultural Studies at the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul. “One way to do that is dressing up women as tomboys – but that’s nothing new. On the contrary, Korea is creating another definition of sexiness – for men.”

In today’s social media era, when gender neutrality and fluidity is very much to the fore, Korean boy bands are redefining maleness with the “flower boy” concept of the pretty, pure, gentle man. K-pop men do things that are have traditionally been associated with, well, women: They wear make-up, dress up, act cute and show that they care.

Among some Western males, this form of masculinity is derided as being “gay.” Millions of Western girls and women, however, have clearly been smitten. And as online pundit [Ask a Korean](#) has often noted: Korean boy groups have tens of thousands of women screaming their names during concerts. If that’s not masculinity – what is?

Hurt calls the “flower boy” trend a new form of “hyper-masculinity” and compares it to a fashion show: Models hit catwalks sporting styles that are not designed for everyday wear, but will spark and define trends and conversations in the real world.



This is new. Meanwhile, girl groups like Blackpink are stuck with a sexualised presentation format that dates back to pre-history.

Boys challenge norms, girls reinforce them

“Pretty dancing girls is an old formula and Korea does it well,” said Hurt. “They maxed out the way you can harness the female body for economical gain.”

“Maxed out,” indeed. However, the problem for Korean girl groups does not stop at being unable to upgrade an already highly sexualized image. At home, girl bands are subject to societal pressures that their male counterparts have been able to challenge.

“Blackpink is just a harder sell than BTS,” John Lie of UC Berkeley’s Sociology Department told Asia Times. “Boy groups project an image that they’re well-built physically and they’re nice, romantic guys. It’s the contrary of what South Korean society actually is, which is, at the core, very masculinist and misogynistic.”

So, while the boy bands are bringing something new to the table – the “flower boy” look and concept – girl groups are stuck.

“While boy groups reflect a difference with Korean culture itself, girl groups are closer to what Korean society projects,” Lie said. “In K-pop, women are submissive, cute and sexy: their self-presentation is not that much at odds with how South Korean women are expected to act.”



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Still, even “flower boys” can be very, very bad boys.

Lie noted that the ongoing [Burning Sun scandal](#) – in which multiple A-list K-pop male celebrities have been named and shamed in a sex trafficking, drugs and bribery ring centred on the Burning Sun night club in Seoul’s funky Gangnam district – exposes the hypocrisy of at least some male bands’ idealistic images.

The scandal, though, probably won’t affect K-pop as a whole: After all, the genre’s top names, BTS and Blackpink, are not implicated. The question now is what will drive the genre forward.

Being real is the new deal

According to Bernie Cho, a Seoul-based industry player with DFSB Kollektive, the future of K-pop is not about gender, it is about how truly global they the genre can go. In that sense, both BTS and Blackpink point to a new future.

“BTS can sing, rap, or chat comfortably in Korean, English or Japanese,” Cho said. “Blackpink goes even further as they have members who can also communicate in Chinese and Thai.” Moreover, unlike most Asian music, K-Pop artist names and song titles are often provided in a bilingual Korean-English format, Cho noted.

For the music industry executive, BTS and Blackpink represent a new kind of act in K-pop where being highly trained singers or dancers is not enough.

BTS are “actual authentic artists who play key roles in producing, composing, and writing lyrics to their own hits,” he said. “Even Blackpink can’t be placed in the ‘just cute’ category. If they ever wanted to be a live band, they could pull it off.”

Rather than being carefully curated products manufactured on factory-line production process – the previous formula for K-pop acts – BTS and Blackpink indicate that it is now about being artists, rather than simply performers.

“The ‘fake it ’till you make it’ days are over,” said Cho. “Being real is the deal now...authenticity has displaced automation as the new normal.”

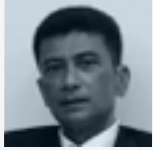
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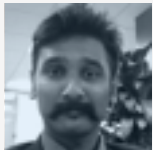
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