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Research on Character Content in K-Pop Idols: Creative Utilization and Formation of Fan Communities

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Abstract

In the K-content industry, K-pop is a vital cultural phenomenon that extends beyond music to influence fashion, beauty, tourism, and the character industries. In particular, the idol characterization industry plays a vital role in fostering a bond between artists and fans and strengthening brand identity. For example, BTS's BT21 and New Jeans' rabbit characters are effectively expanding into a variety of products and media content. These characters appear across diverse platforms, contributing to a broader engagement with fans. Moreover, generating revenue through characters serves as a tool to deeply convey the artist's musical worldview and concept, beyond short-term profits. Idol characters have the complementary function of clearly presenting the artist's image to the public and enhancing the character's prominence. Webtoons, animations, and games featuring idol characters contribute to securing and expanding new fandoms. Interactions with these characters can boost brand loyalty and increase product sales. The study reveals that character-based marketing not only strengthens fandom and enhances brand loyalty but also effectively conveys the artist's vision. It highlights the crucial role of leveraging digital platforms to boost profitability and engage audiences. Furthermore, the study explores the long-term impact of these strategies on the K-Pop industry, showing how they facilitate global expansion, market entry, and sustained growth, thereby reinforcing K-Pop's position as a leading force in global entertainment.

Keywords: *Character Industry Market, K-Pop, Media Content, Character Design, Visual Communication, K-Contents*

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1. Introduction

The early Korean wave was represented by K-Dramas and K-Movies in the 1990s, with 'K-Pop's activities in the early 2000s driving a second wave of growth. [1] The rise of Korean Pop culture began with the emergence of the first generation of idols, gaining popularity across Asia and attracting international attention. The term 'K-Pop' was first used on October 9, 1999, in a Billboard magazine article titled "S. Korea To Allow Some Japanese Live Acts." [2] Since the 2010s, the rise of social media has significantly contributed to the globalization of Korean Pop culture. [1] K-Pop is now a crucial component of the K-content industry. According to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), Asia remains a leading region for physical album sales, accounting for about half (49.2%) of global sales, largely driven by strong K-Pop performance sales. As K-Pop artists' fandoms have grown, idols have taken on the role of influencers. For instance, BTS's official Instagram account has over 74 million followers as of 2024,

and Blackpink's YouTube channel has more than 93 million subscribers. These large followings demonstrate that content posted by idols garners millions of views, extending their influence beyond the music industry. The greater the credibility, professionalism, and attractiveness of influencers, the stronger their relationship with their audience. [3] In other words, an artist's positive image boosts public demand for additional products and content. Consequently, contemporary K-Pop leads trends in fashion, beauty, and tourism, in addition to music. The character industry is also emerging as a significant sector. K-Pop idols are evolving in various markets, interacting with fans through diverse designs and media. Studies have explored how these interactions and the evolving roles of idols in different industries impact their relationship with fans and overall brand identity. As of 2019, the corporate value of BigHit Entertainment, the agency representing BTS and the producer of BT21, surpassed \$1 billion. [4] According to the Financial Supervisory Service's electronic disclosure system, the company's assets amounted to 5.523 trillion KRW as of the third quarter of 2023, after rebranding to HYBE Entertainment. In 2023, HYBE Entertainment recorded consolidated sales of 2.1781 trillion KRW and an operating profit of 295.8 billion KRW. [5] This remarkable financial growth underscores the company's strategic diversification into various entertainment sectors, including character merchandise and global market expansion. Among the largest K-content companies in Korea, the growth of HYBE Entertainment has also shown remarkable growth compared to CJ E&M, a local film producer with 4.3683 trillion KRW in sales and 14.6 billion KRW in operating losses in 2023. [6]

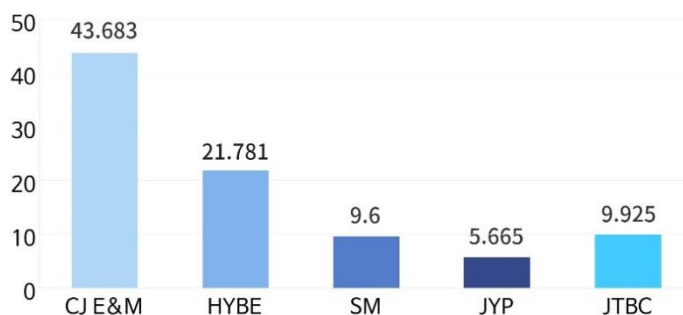


Figure 1. 2023 sales comparison table of CJ E&M, HYBE, SM, JYP, and JTBC as reported directly by each company

HYBE's success stems from its innovative business model that combines music production, artist management, and character branding, generating multiple revenue streams and boosting global brand equity. To assess the

impact of character marketing on sales, we analyzed sales data for K-pop idol character products, using company sales reports and public databases as primary sources.

2. BTS Character Design

In the realm of fictional characters created through the human creative process, they are classified as invented characters. Conversely, characters produced with the right to publicity of a real person are classified as real characters.[7] For example, the character business of the group BTS clearly illustrates this distinction. BTS's invented character is 'BT21,' while the real character is 'Titan.' Unlike the conventional method of creating avatars that imitate the artist's appearance, the BTS members directly participated in the character sketches, storytelling settings, and product planning for BT21. BT21 features a simplified design consisting of simple shapes and lines, which conveys a sense of cuteness. It is characterized by an indicator symbol, a symbol that forms an existential connection with the object it represents through a causal relationship.[7] Although BT21 is connected to the BTS members, it remains based on fiction, allowing it to be enjoyed without prior knowledge of the artists. This approach has broadened BT21's appeal, attracting both BTS's existing fandom (ARMY) and consumers of 'Line Friends.' In March 2019, the BT21 Harajuku store in Japan recorded 15,000 visitors and showed a 215% increase in sales each year. [8] This indicating a robust and growing consumer base. The same year, the 'Line Friends LA Hollywood Store' in Los Angeles, centered around BT21, attracted over 18,000 visitors,[8] demonstrating the business's scale both domestically and internationally. As of 2024, the BT21 YouTube account has 5,290,000 subscribers, with an estimated net worth ranging from \$194K to \$1.16M, reflecting its significant online presence and potential for digital revenue generation.



Figure 2. BT21 Concept art Image

3. Fandom Culture

In 2022, "NewJeans," an independent label, took a unique approach to marketing. Unlike traditional methods, there were no teasers featuring the real images of the artists. Instead, the promotion included an animation video on Instagram featuring five rabbit characters.



Figure 3. ADOR Corporation Instagram Image

The rabbit characters express the identities of the five members of 'NewJeans.' These characters have been featured across various media, including album covers, animations, pop-up store signs, merchandise, and logos. Starting with their debut album "New Jeans," the rabbit characters have been consistently used, with only minor changes in details like color and texture, on subsequent releases such as the first single album "OMG," the pre-release single "Ditto," the collaboration single "Zero," and the remix album "NJWMX." The "OMG" album achieved initial sales of 7.01 million copies, generating 13 billion KRW in revenue. [9] The strategic use of these characters has created a recognizable and consistent brand image, which has enhanced consumer loyalty and engagement. This strategy aims to make the rabbit characters synonymous with 'NewJeans,' reinforcing the group's brand identity. The fandom name, "Bunnies," further connects fans with the characters. Unlike typical character goods created for sales, the rabbit characters of NewJeans were developed as a branding tool to establish the group's identity and foster a strong connection with their fandom.

In K-pop fandom culture, characters also facilitate connections among fans. According to Henri Tajfel and John Turner's 'Social Identity Theory,' individuals seek to enhance their self-esteem and certainty by identifying with a group that provides positive reinforcement. There is also a strong sense of belonging within fandom culture. The "cultural community" of fandom enables individuals to form close relationships with people they have never met in person, extending beyond traditional community boundaries and even influencing their real-world interactions. [10] This phenomenon illustrates the transformative power of fandom in shaping social identities and interpersonal. K-Pop character goods have become crucial for fans to recognize each other offline. For instance, when a character doll is worn as a key ring, other fans can identify the character and feel a sense of solidarity, knowing they support the same singer. These K-Pop idol goods not only express the image of an idol but also foster interaction and communication among fans, thereby strengthening the sense of solidarity within the fandom. Such interactions underscore the significant role of character goods in cultivating a cohesive and engaged fan community.

4. Expand Through Collaboration with Other Industries

An example of generating revenue by integrating characters with various industries is 'NCT CCOMAZ,' from SM Entertainment's group NCT. In April 2023, the NCT characters launched a grocery store-themed pop-up store called 'NCT CCOMAZ GROUP STORE,' which sold a range of merchandise and promoted the artists. This initiative showcases the innovative use of themed retail spaces to create unique consumer experiences, directly engaging fans in physical locations and strengthening brand loyalty. Additionally, their collaboration with the popular character Sanrio highlights a strategic cross-industry partnership, using established character brands to enhance market presence and diversify product offerings.



Figure 4. NCT X Sanrio Character Product Image

An example of this cross-industry collaboration is the limited-edition photo frames released under the name NCT X Sanrio by 'Photo Signature,' a domestic unmanned four-cut photo brand. These frames are decorated with NCT and Sanrio character themes, allowing fans to take pictures with the characters, illustrating the introduction of idol characters into the four-cut photo market. Such collaborations not only leverage the popularity of both brands but also introduce innovative product formats that appeal to a broad audience. Another example is in the clothing industry. The SPA brand Spao released limited-edition NCT X Sanrio pajamas, featuring a design that repeatedly displays both Sanrio and NCT characters. The collection includes 22 items, each representing the individuality of the NCT members, and came with an artist photo card for each product purchased. This collaboration in the apparel sector demonstrates how character branding can be effectively integrated into fashion to create exclusive, collectible items that enhance consumer engagement and loyalty. These examples highlight the practical benefits of cross-industry collaborations, which provide diverse revenue streams and enhance the overall brand identity of K-pop groups. Such collaborations offer a valuable area for research into the effectiveness of character branding in expanding market reach and boosting consumer engagement.

5. Leverage a Variety of Media Platforms

Characters can embody the traits of real artists while extending their presence into areas where it may be difficult for the artists themselves to appear. [11] For instance, a snow AR filter emoticon was released featuring BTS's BT21 characters. Additionally, the game 'Puzzle Star BT21' achieved 1 million downloads worldwide within just two days of its launch. [12] Long-term media content examples include the character webtoon series "DARK MOON" featuring the idol group ENHYPEN from Hive Label's Belift Lab. On the Naver Webtoon platform, there are three series: "DARK MOON: The Altar of the Moon," "DARK MOON: Gray City," and "Children of Bamfield by DARK MOON." These webtoons are based on ENHYPEN's musical worldview and settings and have been serialized in about nine countries. They attracted a new webtoon fandom distinct from the existing artist fandom and achieved 100 million cumulative page views.

Additionally, the "Dark Moon Castle" event, a collaboration between Lotte World and ENHYPEN's "DARK MOON" series, underscores the commercial potential of such integrations. Held from September 1 to November 19, 2023, the event resulted in a more than 17% increase in visitor numbers at Lotte World, [13] reflecting the positive impact of character-themed attractions on both engagement and revenue.



<Figure 5> Collaboration between Lotte World and "DARK MOON"(ENHYPEN)

5. Conclusion

The characterization of K-pop idols not only yields immediate financial gains in merchandise sales but also serves

as a profound vehicle for conveying the artist's musical ethos and vision. The visual representation of these characters allows the public to grasp not just the artist's music, but also their abstract charm and personality through simplified symbols. By embodying these characters, artists can foster stronger connections with their fanbase, nurturing a sense of empathy and belonging within the fandom. These characters play a complementary role in articulating the artist's image to the public, bolstering their position through the artist's popularity.

Moreover, through strategic utilization of idol IP characters in various media, new markets can be pioneered, and economic impacts can be generated through collaborations across diverse industries, including webtoons, animations, web novels, games, VR, and fashion, alongside the K-pop industry. For instance, partnering with the gaming industry not only amplifies interactions between artists and fans, but also injects fresh entertainment elements into the gaming landscape. Such cross-industry collaborations offer a plethora of products to idol fans, enriching their experience and broadening the perception of artists. These collaborations have proven effective in increasing consumer engagement and expanding the fanbase, as seen in the successful integration of BTS's BT21 characters in various markets and media. The synergy between these industries is poised to play a pivotal role in propelling the reach and impact of K-pop idol characters on a global scale. For example, the introduction of characters in the fashion industry, like the NCT X Sanrio collaboration, demonstrates the versatility and appeal of idol characters beyond traditional merchandise. To adapt to the evolving market, leveraging characters via digital platforms is crucial. This includes VR experiences, SNS challenges, and social media filters, fostering deeper connections between artists and fans beyond mere imagery. Such interactions can cultivate a stronger fan community, enhancing solidarity between fandoms and artists. These values are vital for effectively managing and promoting artists' activities and images, with potential to increase profitability through enhanced brand loyalty and product sales. Academically, this study provides a model for understanding the economic and cultural impacts of character-based marketing in the entertainment industry. The empirical evidence, such as the correlation between character merchandise sales and overall album sales, demonstrates the practical effectiveness of these strategies. It emphasizes the importance of character-based approaches in strengthening fandom and enhancing brand loyalty, providing valuable insights into the broader implications of character marketing in global entertainment. This model of communication is anticipated to boost public engagement and creativity, driving overall activity. Moreover, it highlights the crucial role of character marketing in the economic landscape of the entertainment industry, serving as a blueprint for future research and practice. In conclusion, character marketing in the K-pop industry is not only a tool for economic gain but also a vital strategy for cultural expression and fan engagement.

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