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BREAKING THE BORDERS: MARKETING TECHNIQUES IN THE K-POP INDUSTRY GOT7 CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT: Korean Pop music has made a name for itself worldwide within a short time, and the study aims to explore the marketing strategies used by the Korean pop music industry to become a worldwide sensation, focusing on the case of the boy band GOT7. The social identity theory explained fan loyalty, and the Parasocial Interaction Theory clarified fans' single-sided devotion to idols. The Transmedia Storytelling Theory examines how different media channels can be used to communicate with audiences. The data was collected by an online survey with 500 samples representing global K-pop fans. The study emphasizes that fostering a sense of community and belonging among fans by the industry's use of social networking sites, personalized messages, and fan service to cultivate emotional connections with fans has contributed to the success. Furthermore, excessive parasocial interaction may have drawbacks in the long term; hence, finding more sustainable marketing strategies is a necessity within the industry. The study suggests key strategies for international market success in terms of social identity theory, parasocial interaction theory and transmedia storytelling theory, which collectively promote brand loyalty, audience growth, and sustainable success in the global market.

KEYWORDS: K-pop, Parasocial interaction theory, Social identity theory, Transmedia storytelling, Brand loyalty, Relationship marketing.



INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore the marketing strategies used by the Korean pop music industry to become a worldwide sensation within a few years and how the industry keeps a stable and steady massive fanbase for an extended period of time. The term “worshipping” would even be suitable to describe the fandom around K-pop groups due to the extreme involvement with the groups’ activities (Sansone and Sansone, 2019). The K-pop industry has used distinctive marketing strategies that are not popularly used by the music industry to promote or grow artists. The marketing strategies followed by K-pop companies consist of various methods such as social media marketing, personal selling, public relations, fan culture and fan service, content creation, strategic collaborations, and so on (Kim and Kwon, 2022). Even though various strategies are used, not every strategy is effective. Hence, it is crucial to identify the most effective strategies that bring success in the global market.

Rationale of the Study

K-pop has emerged as a powerful form of soft power, significantly contributing to South Korea’s global influence and economy. In 2019 alone, the Korean Wave (Hallyu) generated \$12.3 billion, highlighting K-pop’s strong presence in the international market (Guo, Wang & Zhang, 2020). Beyond economics, K-pop has also entered the political sphere, influencing diplomatic relations and positioning itself as a cultural force worldwide (Bartlett, 2022).

Despite its growing global impact, there is a noticeable lack of academic research exploring the marketing strategies behind K-pop’s international success. This study aims to address this gap by analyzing how K-pop, particularly through the case of GOT7, has leveraged marketing to achieve global recognition. The findings may offer broader insights applicable to other industries seeking international market expansion.

Research Aim

The study is expected to identify the marketing strategies of the K-pop industry, mainly focusing on the band GOT7 and its journey to global success.

Research Objective

- To examine the international growth of K-pop.
- To analyse how K-pop companies market artists globally.
- To assess the impact of these strategies on GOT7’s global success and the wider industry.
- To identify effective global marketing strategies applicable across industries.

Research Question

- How has K-pop expanded globally over the past two decades?
- What key marketing strategies do K-pop companies use to promote artists internationally?
- What marketing strategies were used to promote GOT7?



- How did these strategies drive GOT7's global success?
- What universal marketing strategies can industries use to reach international markets?

In summary, this study aims to explore and evaluate the unique marketing strategies employed by the K-pop industry, with a focus on GOT7, to achieve sustained global success. With K-pop emerging as both an economic and cultural powerhouse, the research seeks to fill the academic gap by identifying which strategies are most effective in building international fan bases and long-term engagement. The insights gained may serve as a blueprint for other industries aiming to penetrate global markets through innovative and emotionally resonant marketing approaches.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Korean pop music, or K-pop, has become a global sensation over the past two decades, prompting interest in how the industry achieved such worldwide success. Its international appeal is often attributed to high-production music videos, catchy tunes, dynamic choreography, and visually striking performances (Romano, 2018). While some argue K-pop is simply a fusion of Western hip-hop with little connection to Korean culture (Sun, 2022), others highlight the role of Korean dramas in boosting its global visibility (Pratamasari, Syaifani & Toreh, 2018). However, K-pop's global breakthrough arguably came with PSY's Gangnam Style in 2012, which went viral and surpassed Justin Bieber's Baby as YouTube's most viewed video after just 132 days (Kosner, 2012).

Debate persists over whether Korean artists must abandon their cultural roots to succeed in Western markets. While some suggest a shift away from East Asian influences is necessary (Bosch, 2023), JYP artist Rain's failed U.S. debut—criticized for being too Westernized—suggests otherwise. Research indicates that K-pop's success is strongest when it blends Korean elements with global music styles like hip-hop and rap (Lie, 2012; Lee, 2014).

K-pop's international expansion began in the mid-2000s with entry into Japanese and Chinese markets, later reaching Southeast Asia (Parc & Kawashima, 2018). According to Oh (2013), four key factors enabled its growth: idol image, reduced censorship, technological advancement, and economic liberalization. Marketing strategies have evolved around these elements to reach global audiences.

Marketing in the K-pop Industry

Parasocial Relationships and Community Building

Marketing in K-pop revolves around creating value and building lasting relationships with consumers (Doyle & Stern, 2006; Li & Peng, 2011). With the evolution of digital platforms, the industry has uniquely leveraged social media and apps to cultivate parasocial relationships—one-sided emotional bonds between idols and fans (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019). Idols are held to strict public standards, avoiding controversial topics to maintain a consistent, marketable image (Yang, 2022).

Fan communities, or stan culture, are at the core of the industry's financial success (Kelley, 2019). These communities are sustained through shared goals, such as streaming targets and



collective campaigns, which foster a sense of belonging (Tsui, 2023). Fans often connect through discussions, theories, and emotional investment in idols (Laffan, 2020).

The industry also employs transmedia storytelling, where continuous content across multiple platforms keeps fans engaged year-round (Kwak, 2020; Vaddadi, 2021). Reality shows, concerts, meet-and-greets, and exclusive messaging apps like Weverse and Dear U' bubble help sustain these emotional ties (Pereira, 2022; Ma et al., 2022). While this strengthens fan loyalty, it also raises concerns about potential unhealthy idol attachments.

Global Marketing Strategies in K-pop

K-pop companies have adopted diverse strategies to reach the international market. A key approach involves multinational and multilingual groups. For example, GOT7, with members fluent in several languages, was strategically designed to appeal to a global audience (Istad, Gibson & Curran, 2022; Sun, 2020). Localized content, such as performances or songs in the target audience's language, is another common method (Chen, 2016).

However, fluency or cultural identity alone may not guarantee international success. For instance, PSY's breakout hit "Gangnam Style" went viral globally despite his unconventional idol image (Lee & Kuwahara, 2014). Likewise, JYP founder Jinyoung Park has found long-term success without fitting traditional beauty standards (Benjamin, 2019), suggesting that talent and uniqueness can be equally impactful.

Another critical strategy is the use of social networking sites (SNS) to generate buzz and build direct connections with fans (Le, 2018). K-pop also excels in product diversification—selling merchandise, webtoons, games, albums, and concert experiences (Cha, 2021). Albums often include collectible items like photo cards or limited-edition goods, further driving purchases (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021).

Visual storytelling has also emerged as a powerful tool. BTS, for example, uses cinematic music videos and choreographies resembling short films to resonate with Western audiences (Seppälä, 2022). This multimedia approach not only enhances global appeal but also enriches fan engagement beyond music alone (Leung, 2012).

GOT7 in Global Marketing and Fan Retention

GOT7 is a multinational boy group comprising four Korean members—JayB (Jaebeom Lim), Jinyoung (Jinyoung Park), Youngjae (Youngjae Choi), and Yugyeom (Yugyeom Kim)—and three international members—Mark (Mark Tuan, Chinese-American), Jackson (Jackson Wang, Hong Kong-Chinese), and BamBam (Kumpimook Bhuwakal, Thai) (Sara, 2020). This diverse lineup exemplifies a strategic move by K-pop agencies to broaden global appeal through cultural representation and multilingual reach.

Known for their dynamic performances incorporating martial arts and acrobatics, GOT7 quickly established a strong international fanbase (Sara, 2020). Beyond music, members have expanded into solo careers, acting in dramas, contributing to original soundtracks, and launching individual music projects (Cage, 2021).

Significantly, GOT7 demonstrated exceptional fan loyalty and brand resilience after parting ways with JYP Entertainment in 2021. Their independently released 2022 album sold over



500,000 copies, reflecting the strength of their fandom and the effectiveness of their long-term engagement strategies (Firth, 2021; Herman, 2022; Bright, 2022). This highlights how cultivating a sense of identity and community can sustain success even outside traditional industry structures.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

Social Identity Theory

Developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), social identity theory explains how individuals define themselves through group membership, with three core stages: categorisation, social identity, and social comparison (McLeod, 2023). In marketing, this theory helps explain how brands foster consumer identification and loyalty through shared values and community (Farivar & Wang, 2022). In K-pop, companies leverage this by building tight-knit fandoms with structured goals, social media interaction, and inter-fan competition (Tinaliga, 2018; George, 2020). Platforms like Twitter facilitate these communities, reinforcing fans' group identity and engagement (Kim et al., 2013).

Parasocial Interaction Theory

First introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), parasocial interaction theory describes one-sided relationships between audiences and public figures, often resulting in perceived intimacy (Brown, 2015; De Guzman Centeno, 2016). These relationships fulfill emotional and psychological needs, with media platforms simulating direct engagement (Cole & Leets, 1999). In K-pop, artists actively engage with fans through social media, reinforcing this illusion of closeness (Chalish et al., 2022). While often benign, parasocial dynamics can sometimes lead to obsessive behavior (Sansone & Sansone, 2019). K-pop marketing capitalizes on this phenomenon to build loyalty and emotional investment among fans.

Transmedia Storytelling Theory

Transmedia storytelling involves delivering unified narrative across multiple platforms, enhancing audience engagement and immersion (Ryan, 2015). According to Jenkins (2009), key features include world-building, multimodality, and collective storytelling—where fans interact across channels like games, videos, and social media (Kim, Kang & Hong, 2016). In K-pop, this strategy enables deeper fan participation and brand loyalty, aligning with industry goals of global reach and sustained engagement.

In conclusion, the literature highlights that K-pop's global success is driven by strategic marketing practices that go beyond music, including fan engagement, transmedia storytelling, and digital innovation. By blending Korean cultural elements with global appeal, K-pop companies have cultivated strong emotional connections and loyal fan communities worldwide. These strategies, supported by theoretical frameworks like social identity and parasocial interaction, provide valuable insights into how emotional resonance, community-building, and cultural adaptability can contribute to international market success—principles that can be applied across various industries.



METHODOLOGY

Research Philosophy

The research philosophy underpinning this study is Positivism, which is consistent with the use of quantitative data to examine causal relationships between variables. This approach aims to objectively analyze the impact of specific factors and provide explanations for the causes and patterns of behavior (Neuman, 2014). Given that this study investigates the relationship between marketing strategies employed by the K-pop industry and its global market expansion, a positivist framework is the most appropriate. However, it is important to note that this approach assumes the researcher remains detached and unbiased throughout the study, and that social behavior can be assessed through quantifiable variables, without considering the subjective and complex nature of human experience.

Research Approach

The study employs a deductive research approach, which is well-suited for utilizing quantitative data to identify strategies that contribute to success in the global K-pop market. By adopting this approach, the study aims to draw specific conclusions from a broader framework. Through the analysis of quantitative data, the research seeks to uncover patterns, correlations, and trends related to marketing within the K-pop industry.

Research Strategy

This study adopts a survey strategy to collect a large, systematically analyzable dataset. Online surveys are chosen for their convenience, cost-effectiveness, and ability to reach a broad audience quickly, making them ideal for capturing a diverse sample that represents the global K-pop population.

Choices

A mono-method quantitative design was used, relying solely on structured questionnaires. The questions included multiple-choice, Likert scale, and yes/no formats to assess specific variables. Responses were analyzed using frequencies, percentages, and basic statistical tests.

Time Horizon

The data has been collected using the cross-sectional method during a specific time frame. Specifically, from the 30th of June to the 7th of July 2023, enabling a snapshot of analysis of the subject matter within a concise period.

Sampling Technique

Data was collected through an online questionnaire targeting K-pop and GOT7 fans. The survey link was distributed via social media platforms—Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp groups—to reach a global K-pop fan base, collecting 500 random samples. Two screening questions ensured relevant responses: “Do you know K-pop?” to filter for general K-pop knowledge, and “Do you know GOT7?” to ensure the GOT7-specific questions were answered by fans familiar with the group.



Data analysis

Descriptive analysis was conducted using Excel to assess respondents' agreement with various marketing strategies in the questionnaire. This analysis identified the strategies that contributed to GOT7's popularity internationally and the methods fans found most effective. Given the study's focus on discovering effective strategies, descriptive analysis was an appropriate choice. An open-ended question, "Anything additional to add regarding the fan girl/fan boy experience?" was included to gather deeper insights. A total of 97 responses were collected, and the most relevant answers were analyzed using narrative quotation techniques.

Ethical consideration

Ethical approval was obtained following GDPR and Data Protection Impact Assessment guidelines. Participants were informed of their rights, including voluntary participation and anonymity. All data was securely stored on a password-protected device, and no risks were associated with participation.

Limitations

Focusing solely on GOT7 may limit generalizability, as responses may not reflect the full range of K-pop marketing strategies. The exclusive use of quantitative methods overlooks deeper qualitative insights. Cultural differences and the short data collection period may also affect the depth of the findings. Additionally, relying on fan perspectives may introduce bias.

RESULTS

The survey sample represents a global spectrum of K-pop fans, offering valuable insight into the effectiveness and impact of specific techniques.

Global Fanbase Profile

The survey captured a diverse sample of 500 K-pop fans from 67 countries, spanning five different age groups. All respondents identified as K-pop fans, with 58% indicating they always listen to K-pop and 26% as dedicated fans who follow the genre regularly. Around 43% actively follow K-pop-related updates on social media, and 70.8% consider K-pop an integral part of their daily lives.

These insights show the strong and consistent presence of K-pop in the lives of international fans. Specifically, GOT7's fandom reflects this engagement, with a significant portion of the sample showing continuous interest in the group.

Community Dynamics

Among GOT7's fandom—known as IGOT7 or Aghase—65.9% are members of fan communities, indicating a strong network for fan-to-fan interaction. The data shows a steady increase in fanbase growth since the group's debut, maintaining momentum even after their contract with their original company ended.

Fans reported discovering GOT7 through a variety of channels, including dramas, variety



shows, other K-pop artists, and word of mouth. However, video streaming platforms such as YouTube emerged as the primary discovery method, emphasizing the role of visual content in promoting the group. Social networking sites and traditional media like TV shows also contributed significantly. Notably, word of mouth helped build a community-driven vibe around GOT7, showing that shared experiences play a key role in sustaining interest.

The sense of community was also reflected in fan activities. About 65.5% follow social media updates on GOT7's comebacks, and nearly 48% stay up until midnight to watch teaser releases, reinforcing the idea of a collective fan journey. Fans reported feeling like active participants in the group's success, especially during comeback seasons when streaming and voting contribute to collective goals.

Strategic Content and Promotion

Fan meetings and concerts were the most well-received promotional strategies, with 83.9% and 71.5% of respondents, respectively, expressing interest in attending. Localised concerts were preferred by 82.7% of fans. However, 59% disagreed with paying for official fan club memberships, suggesting fans value real-world or virtual experiences over transactional exclusivity.

Product-based strategies, such as albums with photo booklets, posters, and pre-order benefits, received mixed responses. While fans appreciated high-quality, collectible merchandise, many were critical of multiple album versions and seasonal packages, which felt more profit-driven than fan-focused.

Content creation proved to be the most effective and well-received strategy. Fans responded positively to reality shows, behind-the-scenes videos, dance practices, and live broadcasts (like V-Lives), which allowed them to connect with the group in a more casual and personal way. However, paying premium prices for content was generally viewed as unnecessary.

Collaborations also played a significant role in expanding GOT7's reach, with 54.4% of fans responding favourably to the group working with other artists. Moreover, 48.2% agreed that singing in languages beyond Korean enhances international appeal and makes the musical experience more inclusive.

Emotional Connection and Perception

Fan engagement extended beyond content consumption into emotional investment. The survey showed that many fans have a favourite member, with personality and talent cited as the top reasons for their preference, challenging earlier claims that physical appearance is paramount in K-pop success (as argued by Oh, 2013).

Social media platforms were central to maintaining this emotional connection. 54% of respondents agreed that interactions through social media made the artist feel like a friend. However, 78.7% said they would not pay for direct messaging services, indicating that authentic, freely accessible communication is more valued than monetized intimacy. Still, the 22% who favoured paid direct contact represent a loyal subsegment that contributes significantly to revenue.

When asked about the importance of the "idol image," only 6% strongly agreed that it mattered,



while 63% strongly disagreed that being single was important. This suggests fans are more interested in the artist's craft and personality than in maintaining a pristine, unattached public persona.

Fan service also received a largely neutral response (44%), signalling that while appreciated by some, it is not central to the fan experience. However, GOT7's multilingual communication was a standout, with fans strongly appreciating their efforts to engage in multiple languages, highlighting language as a key factor in global connection.

DISCUSSION

This discussion analyses the study's findings in relation to existing literature, identifying key marketing strategies that contributed to GOT7's rapid global success. The data reveals a strong correlation between successful fan engagement strategies and the group's international appeal.

Entertainment companies often cultivate fandoms even before a group's debut by assigning names and colours, fostering a sense of identity and belonging (Maros & Abdul Basek, 2022). Fans define themselves through their commitment—streaming music, knowing detailed artist information, following social media updates, and believing in a mutual bond. One respondent noted *"It was a little embarrassing to be a fangirl at my age, but I found lots of K-pop friends around my age which made me feel normal."*

Social media plays a key role in building global fanbases. However, paid memberships were seen as unnecessary by most fans, who prefer inclusive, non-transactional community experiences. The K-pop industry sustains interest year-round through buzz-worthy campaigns, teaser countdowns, and frequent updates across platforms (Diyana Kamarolzaman et al., 2022). Participatory culture is vital—fans contribute labor by streaming and promoting, seeing themselves as part of the group's success. This collective identity encourages loyalty and informal brand ambassadorship.

A core marketing strategy in K-pop is the use of parasocial interactions—one-sided emotional connections fans form with idols. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Weverse simulate intimacy through personalized content. Fans often view idols as close friends or family, despite the lack of reciprocal relationships. Some respondents acknowledged the risks:

"I feel like companies try to present K-pop groups as BFs, which is problematic, especially when they get married/have partners."

"I hope fans understand parasocial relationships and how dangerous they can be. Be a fan, but they are not our friends."

While this emotional bond drives loyalty, it also raises ethical concerns around fan expectations and artist privacy. Still, the findings confirm that fans prioritize personality and talent over appearance, challenging earlier beliefs that visuals dominate K-pop success: *"I follow them for their talents, not how they look."*

Transmedia storytelling—sharing narratives across diverse platforms—has been instrumental in expanding GOT7's global fanbase. Fans engage with a wide range of content, including reality shows, music videos, V-Lives, behind-the-scenes clips, and more. These interconnected



experiences deepen emotional attachment and build long-term loyalty (Cronin, 2016). Fans often rewatch such content, and GOT7's shows have recorded high ratings (Kim, 2019), proving the power of consistent content creation.

Furthermore, fan preferences vary in merchandise consumption. While some purchase multiple versions of albums or seasonal kits, most prefer buying a single copy. The K-pop industry addresses this through pre-order strategies and limited editions, ensuring efficient demand management.

Localisation also emerged as a strong strategy. Fans appreciated GOT7's multilingual approach, helping them feel more connected:

"I love how GOT7 ventures into different genres of music and appeals to different crowds by participating in music festivals."

"I don't think it's necessary for them to sing in other languages, but I feel blessed they are multilingual."

Language diversity enhances global accessibility and inclusivity (Fani, Wariyati & Husein, 2021). GOT7's separate Japanese debut (Lee, 2014) and continued musical experimentation underscore how localisation and collaboration support global growth.

In conclusion, while parasocial interaction is not the sole driver of loyalty, it casts a consistent shadow across all strategies. Emotional connection, when ethically and strategically managed, can strengthen brand identity. However, sustainable fan engagement requires balancing emotional access with the artist's well-being. The study suggests that combining participatory culture, transmedia storytelling, and cultural localization has been key to GOT7's international success.

IMPLICATIONS TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Based on the findings, this study identifies several key strategies that can be applied across industries to achieve global market success:

Community Building

Fostering a strong, inclusive community taps into the universal human desire to belong (Bateman, 2021). A supportive fan or consumer base not only enhances brand loyalty but also fuels organic growth through word of mouth and viral engagement.

Diverse and Accessible Content

Delivering varied content across multiple platforms increases visibility and accessibility. This strategy broadens appeal and helps brands cross cultural and geographical boundaries.

Emotional Connection

Developing emotional bonds through social media, events, and direct interactions builds long-term loyalty. Consumers who feel personally connected to a brand or product are more likely to become advocates, both online and offline.



Active Engagement

Ongoing, interactive engagement strengthens consumer relationships and provides valuable feedback. It enhances brand image and supports sustainability by fostering deeper loyalty in competitive markets.

Localisation

Adapting language and content to local cultures and preferences enables wider reach and inclusion. A multilingual, culturally aware approach enhances global acceptance and helps brands resonate with diverse audiences.

Buzz Creation

Sustaining excitement through teasers, campaigns, and timely releases keeps audiences invested. Hype drives conversation, increases visibility, and translates into higher sales and stronger market presence.

Strategic Use of Digital Platforms

Effective management of social media and official websites strengthens brand-consumer connections. These platforms serve as powerful tools for communication, promotion, and breaking geographical barriers, making them essential for global outreach.

CONCLUSION

The study has examined the marketing techniques utilized by the K-pop industry to break the borders and spread across the globe by looking into one of the famous boybands, GOT7. The study has proven certain strategies are more effective than others in order to spread the industry across the globe. Social identity theory and transmedia storytelling theory are shown to be highly effective in creating participatory fan culture, or fan communities, which leads to dedicated fan loyalty. parasocial interaction via digital platforms, private messaging, and fan service has created an emotional bond between idols and fans, which has also contributed to the long-term loyalty of the fan base. This study recognises that the psychological need for validation and emotional attachment can be used by businesses to create more profound customer relationships.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Further investigation is needed regarding the long-term impact of these strategies on the main stakeholders and their sustainability. Since the study is done only using quantitative data, further qualitative studies from a marketing professional's point of view would be beneficial. Also, studying the impact of parasocial interaction theory on building long-term relationships with fans would be beneficial in understanding how to create loyal, steady customer relations.



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