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# ***Alternative or “New Normal”: Shifting Trend of K-pop Concerts in COVID-19 Time<sup>1</sup>***

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## Abstract

The pandemic has greatly changed the production and consumption patterns of culture around the world. Many experts predicted that K-pop, performance-oriented popular music, would suffer a deep recession as offline communication channels, such as concerts and fan meetings, were shut down at the start of the pandemic. Nevertheless, K-pop has survived in a new way with accelerated technology developments to adapt to the condition under the pandemic. This paper explores how K-pop's performance culture attempted to survive the pandemic by reviewing the cases of a number of online concerts held during the pandemic from popular music studies and cultural industry studies perspectives. With this approach, it also considers whether online concerts will remain a temporary alternative to the offline performance culture of K-pop or become a "new normal."

**Keywords: K-pop, online concerts, pandemic, performance, popular music**

## Introduction

The pandemic has greatly changed the culture production and consumption patterns of people around the world. People could no longer gather, and it soon became difficult to even go out of the home. As people look for things that can be done indoors on a small scale, streaming services such as Netflix, which increased its members by 57.1% in 2020,<sup>2</sup> and video platforms like YouTube have become popular. In contrast, other cultural industrial sectors, such as movie theaters and performance culture, where people have to exist in the space physically, have been severely affected.

As face-to-face meetings were restricted, all major offline communication channels such as concerts and fan meetings were blocked in the K-pop industry. Numerous idol groups canceled concerts or postponed the release of new albums. In particular, BTS (an acronym for *Bangtan Sonyeondan*), one of the famous K-pop boy bands, had become tremendously popular in the U.S. and Europe but faced disappointment due to the frustration of world tours and fan meetings. Therefore, it was predicted that K-pop, which was expected to continue to increase its audience due to artists' remarkable overseas market expansion, would naturally experience

a severe recession and not surprisingly, this became somewhat true.

From the first half of 2020, K-pop's recent performance culture sought to survive in a new way through online channels. Though studying K-pop's online concerts is meaningful in finding out how K-pop has adapted itself to a new situation under pandemic conditions, and understanding the present and future of performance culture, the existing studies<sup>3</sup> tend to be limited to classical music online concerts held in 2020. Thus, starting with a theoretical review of K-pop and performance culture, this paper aims to explore how K-pop concerts have been able to occur through the period of the pandemic thanks to technological advances through consideration of popular music studies, cultural industry studies, and related case studies. Finally, this paper concludes by contemplating whether the online concert will remain a temporary alternative for offline concerts during the pandemic or become a "new normal."

## **K-pop and Performance Culture**

Music acts as a means of identity formation, self-expression, and communication.<sup>45</sup> In other words, music itself becomes people's identity and provides a place for social relationship formation. With the advent of media technology, these characteristics of music have been further strengthened. Popular music developed with capitalism and mass media differs from existing art music in that it reaches a wide range of audiences through mass production and mass distribution from an economic point of view.<sup>6</sup> In particular, with the Internet, music has strengthened its communicative endeavor and affected social relations greatly.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, people worldwide have actively participated in the ecosystem of popular music and its communities regardless of geographical and cultural circumstances, enabling music to play an important role in the entire popular culture.

K-pop is a genre of popular music that has recently been actively produced, distributed, and reproduced at the global level. K-pop is an abbreviation of Korean popular music, and it is used to refer to Korean popular music overseas. However, this is not the term that encompasses all Korean popular music, but is used specifically for "idol<sup>8</sup>"-centered music featuring group dance and fast tempo dance music.<sup>9</sup> The current K-pop format originated from powerful dance music that mixes hip-hop and British-American pop first introduced by Seotaiji and Boys in the 1990s, and many entertainment companies have begun to cultivate profitable idols who can sing and dance. Since then, K-pop produced recently, at least after the mid-1990s, differs

significantly in terms of the overall quality and format of the music from the ones produced before then.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, it began to enter overseas markets such as Japan to overcome the limited domestic popular music market. The following five characteristics can elucidate K-pop.

Firstly, K-pop is hybrid. The history of K-pop itself has been a series of mixing and reinterpreting numerous genres. As mentioned earlier, the current K-pop form was started with Seotaiji and Boys' song that combines Western genres with dance. This music gained sensational popularity among the young public represented by teenagers. In particular, since J-pop significantly influenced K-pop until the 1990s, popular music centered on dance music met with Japan's "idol" culture, creating current K-pop idols. In other words, K-pop could become an extension of Korean popular music and, at the same time, develop into a distinct genre centered on idol singers.<sup>11</sup> It has since introduced a unique hybrid genre of music that mixes existing music genres such as hip-hop, Euro-pop, and J-pop. In this way, K-pop has built the current genre by attempting to take up new musical challenges and expand the genre areas based on hybridity.

Secondly, K-pop is global. K-pop is short for Korean popular music, but it does not represent all Korean pop music. It instead is only a genre of idol-centered dance music, so of course, it is not classified as K-pop in Korea, and the term is used only when referring to Korean pop music seen from overseas. In the early days, K-pop had no choice but to turn overseas to generate profits due to the relatively small domestic market in comparison with J-pop, which at the time had the world's second-largest popular music market. Therefore, localization was a vital topic to break the linguistic and cultural barriers of overseas markets. From then on, K-pop started to become global by collaborating with local agencies, embracing foreign members, adding English titles, and holding world tour concerts. This allowed the formation of an international fan base. As a hybrid cultural form, K-pop seemed to be appropriated by its overseas fans as a resource for imagining different and alternative routes of globalization.<sup>12</sup> Hence, K-pop should not be seen simply as the music of a particular ethnic or subcultural group, but rather as a cross-cultural phenomenon in that its production, distribution, and consumption processes are transnationally organized.<sup>13</sup>

Thirdly, K-pop is visual. Even more than other corresponding music genres, K-pop has developed into performance-oriented dance music. As the number of fans who appreciate this aspect of K-pop exploded, artists were naturally expected to be "good-looking" and perform

excellent group dances, and their stage appearance became important in providing visual and auditory pleasure. Also, as discussed above, in order to appeal to overseas markets, elements that could break language and cultural barriers were needed. They, therefore, naturally tried to give more visual enjoyment that does not require complex understanding. In addition to the nature of music that has a relatively low linguistic and cultural barrier,<sup>14</sup> K-pop's dance significantly lowered the barriers with its visuality. This eventually led to the development of K-pop artists' stage art and fashion, making it the visual identity of K-pop.

Fourthly, K-pop is interactive. As Fiske asserted, popular culture consumers play a role as culture producers by participating in culture on their own<sup>15</sup> and in that sense, K-pop fandom worldwide actively participates in K-pop culture based on attachment to artists and a sense of belonging to fandom. According to culture consumer classification—consumers, fans, enthusiasts, prosumers—, enthusiasts have a desire to form a community focused on common interests, and prosumers actively participate in consumption and production.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, K-pop fans, consisting of a number of enthusiasts and prosumers, are deeply involved in the culture of artists, ranging from joining fandom to producing cultural products.<sup>17</sup> Hence, K-pop fans value active communication between artists and fans. In other words, culture producers and consumers are not exclusive; but instead, they interact and create K-pop culture together.

Fifthly, K-pop is technological. K-pop has grown with digitalization and the development of the Internet. In line with the government's Internet supply project, Internet-related technologies were considered perfect for small businesses like the leading K-pop companies due to their much lower entry costs.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, K-pop agencies have been the first in the world to fully realize the potential of new Internet technologies for the distribution and marketing of K-pop performances<sup>19</sup> and the globalization of K-pop consequently activated in 2006 when entertainments distributed music videos of idol groups to global fans through YouTube.<sup>20</sup> As such, K-pop producers could reach a broader range of fans by actively using the Internet and maximizing visual elements by collaborating with cutting-edge technology.

Concerts are a K-pop product that combines these five characteristics. K-pop concert is a hybrid performance that combines music, dance, and stage art. Also, it uses various advanced technologies to reach broader fans, maximize visual pleasure, and exceed the limitations of the stage space.<sup>21</sup> As a live performance, it satisfies all four factors: temporal, spatial, realism, and sharing of acceptance experience<sup>22</sup>, offering a place where K-pop artists

interact with fans worldwide through concerts. Therefore, the concert has significance for both K-pop consumers and producers as a vital element of K-pop culture.

To discuss in detail, from a consumer's perspective, as Brown and Knox argued, live music helps to offer fans an opportunity to see their favorite artist in the flesh.<sup>23</sup> Henry Jenkins defined a culture in which artistic expression and participation are positively evaluated, and members have a certain social bond with other members as a participatory culture.<sup>24</sup> In this regard, K-pop fans value their participation that increases concert utility—subjective satisfaction felt by consuming cultural products<sup>25</sup>—by producing various goods and actively being engaged in the concerts. In other words, concerts provide them with a valuable place to interact directly with the artist and share their participation experiences with other fans.

From a producer's perspective, a concert is an essential channel to earn significant profits from guaranteed audiences from fandom and make various artistic and technological experiments. For K-pop producers who have to develop new consumers and try to maintain existing consumers' purchases<sup>26</sup>, the concert itself offers a significant opportunity to draw people's attention as part of marketing and strengthen their identity through consistent storytelling. In addition, aside from profitability, the concert is where the artists can communicate directly with fans, confirming the affection of fandom. As such, the meaning of a concert in K-pop is not only a simple live performance but is complex and core in K-pop culture.

In summary, concerts occupy a crucial position for both K-pop consumers and producers. During the pandemic when face-to-face concerts became impossible, concerts still had to be held and there was a need to seek ways to proceed with a non-face-to-face convening in order to survive. Therefore, they naturally turned from offline to online channels, and the online concert created in this way served as a valuable opportunity for both consumers and producers.

## ***Untact*, Technology, and Online Concert**

One of the most critical topics in pandemic has been *untact*. *Untact* is a new term coined in Korea in 2017, meaning doing something without touching it.<sup>27</sup> It later developed into the concept of *ontact*, which means being connected online in real-time without actual contact.<sup>28</sup> Under the pandemic where contact with others is limited, both have become essential in all

parts of society. These ideas were also applicable to concerts where actual contact of a massive amount of people is inevitable. Therefore, the entertainments came to hold an online concert, almost the only breakthrough in its survival.

Online performance is a cyberperformance—performance held in cyberspace— that refers to a real-time network performance that allows people from a distance to participate in the performance through a virtual space.<sup>29</sup> Online concert is a genre of this online performance that includes music and encompasses all concerts held online. One of the core benefits to concert attendance is liveness, the idea of seeing and hearing performance with other fans at the time of its occurrence.<sup>30</sup> With the concept of liveness, live performances, including concerts, have been long considered to have unique qualities that technologically copied performances cannot have—time, space, interactivity<sup>31</sup>—as Benjamin explained through the concept of *Aura*.<sup>32</sup>

From this perspective, until recently, online concerts have not been actively conducted as they are considered to cause skepticism about liveness, only allowing recorded videos to be viewed online or live broadcasting of offline concerts. However, Chie raises questions about this classical liveness concept, expanding liveness through recent video media to a mediated liveness by linking visualized performances with an extension of the performance.<sup>33</sup> With the shifting notion of liveness and inevitable conditions under the pandemic, online concerts began to enhance their own characteristics and present the possibility of a new type of liveness, having been actively commercialized and commercialized.

Since online concerts take place through Internet media, they share much of Internet media and cyberspace characteristics. First of all, online concerts are not restricted by time and space. As held in cyberspace, people can easily participate in them anytime, anywhere, as long as they are connected to the Internet. This dramatically increases the accessibility of the audience and acts as a great advantage, especially for overseas fans who have relatively limited chances to participate in offline concerts. Considering that a popular idol group's concert is held with an average of 10,000 people per session, for example, the world's first online paid concert, BEYOND LIVE, attracted 7.5 times more audiences than offline with 75,000 simultaneous viewings.<sup>34</sup> This was possible because the audience could watch the performance without being restricted by space because of the despatializing of Internet media.<sup>35</sup>

Next, online concerts have price advantages. This means that online concerts can lower



supply costs. Typically, the live performance makes ticket prices expensive as it is difficult to standardize and mass-produce as a labor-intensive product.<sup>36</sup> When holding an online concert, of course, there is other consumption such as platform usage fees and early investment in the infrastructure. However, due to the absence of physicality, the cost of operating the concert hall and the costs of transport and travel can be significantly reduced, and therefore the entire production cost can be lower than that of offline concerts.<sup>37</sup> In addition, tickets can be sold indefinitely to a broad audience worldwide, enhancing profitability. For example, offline concert price ranges from 130,000 KRW<sup>38</sup> to 500,000 KRW, but online concerts can be enjoyed for around 50,000 KRW or even close to zero. In a similar context to the high accessibility of Internet media<sup>39</sup>, a lower ticket price attracts not only enthusiastic fandom but also temporary fans or ordinary audiences.

Furthermore, immediate communication is also possible in the online space. Communication is integral for concert participants since the audiences have a social motivation to have common experiences, share experiences, and maximize emotions with people around them by participating in a live concert.<sup>40</sup> Internet media features interactivity<sup>41</sup> and smart devices and social media have accelerated instant interaction. Like offline concerts, online concerts allow the audience to share emotions with others and enrich their concert experiences. For instance, in a BTS concert, the audience members were satisfied when they could see other viewers' real-time reactions to the visuals and the performance during the concert.<sup>42</sup>

With only with these characteristics of Internet media, online concerts do not appear to have noticeable strengths when compared to offline concerts. In other words, there is no apparent reason to produce and consume online concerts when offline concerts can be held. This is the point that determines the life and death of online concerts after the pandemic. The issues to be considered for online concerts were clear as follows: the first issue is how to differentiate the contents of online concerts, and the second issue is how to develop the mediated liveness of online concerts into a unique utility in comparison to classical liveness. K-pop online concerts attempted to solve these issues through the use of advanced technology.

On the one hand, technology has improved the quality and contents of concerts. As mentioned earlier, K-pop producers have thought of concerts as a place to try new technologies. Hence, the technologies, including hologram and VR(Virtual Reality), have already been attempted several times in offline concerts. Outside of K-pop, these cutting-edge technologies have also been used in the global popular music scene. "VR The Champions," for instance,

was also produced using the live performance of British band, Queen.<sup>43</sup> However, high-tech concerts were challenging to commercialize due to skepticism about demand and difficulties in realizing technology in offline spaces. For example, the 2018 BTS World Tour Concert incorporated the latest AR(Augmented Reality) technology in which red heart figures were supposed to appear following the artists' gestures, but it sometimes ended up showing nothing in the end.<sup>44</sup> Despite the challenge, the pandemic accelerated commercializing technology by forcing K-pop producers to adapt it to online concerts.

After the pandemic outbreak, online concerts actively utilized technologies such as VR, AR, and XR(Mixed Reality) to enrich the concert's attractions. For example, the gigantic image of Siwon, a member of the boy band SUPER JUNIOR, filled the 12m high concert hall during the concert. This was a use of volume metric technology that captures each movement of this member in detail with 106 cameras in advance and shows them with high-resolution AR through 3D modeling.<sup>45</sup> Also, a couple of AR tigers ran onto the stage during the song "Tiger" by the boy band SuperM.<sup>46</sup> In this way, online concerts could enhance the visual pleasure and engagement of the audiences by applying virtual images, which are difficult to apply in offline spaces.

Technology, on the other hand, has diversified online concert platforms. As discussed, online concerts have brought doubts about liveness. To make matters worse, high-definition online concerts could have issues when it comes to profitability and stability when transmitted through free streaming services such as YouTube. Thus, online concert platforms needed to create liveness by improving streaming quality and make profits. IT(Information Technology) made it possible to transmit concerts through various platforms developed exclusively for live concerts depending on the needs of K-pop agencies. This became a factor in improving concert satisfaction by inducing stable viewing and audience participation.

As online concerts became inevitable during the pandemic, large Korean entertainment companies rushed to develop new paid online live concert platforms with better application of technology and stability of the connection. For example, Beyond Live, jointly established by SM Entertainment and NAVER—a Korean major IT company, sometimes known as the Korean Google— supports online-optimized concerts that combine advanced technologies such as AR, VR, and volumetric with real-time communication with viewers.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, Live Connect supports multilingual subtitles for global streaming services, enables various technologies, and supplies streaming services that send high-definition and high-quality video

without delay through data optimization and video synchronization.<sup>48</sup> These platforms, therefore, have added elements that only online concerts can make possible, building a peculiar form of live performance.

## Case Study

The previous chapter explored the online concert’s characteristics and distinct strengths. Recognizing online concerts’ applicability, K-pop producers quickly turned to plan online concerts, and plenty have already been held during 2020. This chapter focuses on the following three examples among many cases: SMTOWN Live “Culture Humanity” (hereafter SMTOWN Live), Map of the Soul ON:E (hereafter Map of the Soul), and Bangkyuseok Concert<sup>49</sup>. These concerts are different in the level of organizers and participating artists. Table 1<sup>50</sup> intuitively compares the three examples into several categories. This chapter examines how K-pop online concerts have been held and consumed under the pandemic through the examples.

	<b>SMTOWN Live “Culture Humanity”</b>	<b>Map of the Soul ON:E</b>	<b>Bangkyuseok Conert</b>
<b>Price</b>	Free of charge	49,000~7,1000 KRW	Free of charge
<b>Platform</b>	Youtube/Facebook/TikTok/Twitter	Own platform	Youtube/Twitch
<b>Participants</b>	12 groups of artists at SM Entertainment	BTS	Kyuhyun (A member of Super Junior)
<b>Organizer</b>	Entertainment	Entertainment	Individual artist
<b>Audiences</b>	Multinational audience including SM Entertainment artists’ fandom	Multinational audience centered on BTS fandom	Kyuhyun’s fans centered on Korean fans
<b>Live</b>	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Delay streaming</b>	Available	Partly available (At 11 A.M. the next day)	Available (Currently unavailable)

**Table 1**

### *SMTOWN Live*

SMTOWN Live is the most large scale concert held within the entire entertainment sector , including about 12 groups of artists from SM Entertainment, one of the three largest

entertainment companies. SM Entertainment held about 14 paid online concerts in 2020 under the same name on a platform called Beyond Live, where it participated in investment and development.<sup>51</sup> Beyond Live is an online live performance platform that can be directed in real-time and used as a paid online concert hall for SM Entertainment. As the pandemic continued, in January 2021, SM Entertainment held a free online concert named SMTOWN Live with almost all of its artists.

SMTOWN Live showed the characteristics of online concerts at several points. First of all, it drastically lowered consumer costs. So far, Beyond Live concerts could only be seen on the paid platform, but SMTOWN Live was streamed through YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter free of charge. Additionally, the company does not explicitly limit fans' re-sharing of videos; thus, fans even now watch them freely on platforms such as YouTube. This played a significant role in facilitating audience access, along with de-spatiality, one of the major characteristics of Internet media.

SMTOWN Live also actively used various advanced technologies used at Beyond Live concerts for stage art. For instance, the stage was expanded using AR technology, evoking audience impression and strengthening the identity of AESPA, a girl band of SM Entertainment, by creating a stage that fits well with their futuristic-concept storytelling. On top of that, when individual artists appeared on the screen, their names simultaneously popped up so that the audience could access the artists' information, thereby improving the audience's utility.

Meanwhile, there are limitations as well. SMTOWN Live was not a live performance but a concert video that combined recorded sessions and streamed live to the audiences. This contests liveness and is accompanied by doubts about whether it can be called a live concert. In the visualized performance, however, it is more important for the audience to recognize it as "live."<sup>52</sup> Therefore, even though the performance was not conducted in real-time, it can be accepted as an online concert with a mediated liveness in that the performance video was streamed live, and the audience could watch and interact at the same time.

In summary, SMTOWN Live focused on lowering the barriers to accessibility for the audience while utilizing its characteristics as an online concert. It was able to lower both spatiotemporal and financial barriers in that it was an online concert streamed simultaneously on various platforms for free. As a result, it recorded about 35.83 million streams in 186 countries, the highest number for an online concert ever.<sup>53</sup> With this maximized accessibility,

SMTOWN Live hoped to raise expectations for offline concerts to be held again in the post-pandemic era by meeting the needs of K-pop consumers who were thirsty for quality online concerts<sup>54</sup> rather than generating enormous profits instantly. As such, SMTOWN Live showed the possibility of online concerts used as a marketing tool.

### *Map of the Soul*

Map of the Soul was also held at the agency level, but it is a smaller level concert involving only one group of artists, BTS. It was hosted by BTS's agency Hybe Entertainment (formerly Big Hit Entertainment) and was initially planned as an offline world tour. In 2020, BTS succeeded in putting their new song "Dynamite" on the Billboard chart in a row and expanded its global fandom.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, the concert was essential for making new fans settle down to be long term fans, and offering communication channels for existing fans. In response, BTS already held an online concert named Bangbangcon the Live in June, and in October, Map of the Soul was held in an online format for both global and Korean fandom.

Map of the Soul utilized various characteristics of online concerts, including stage art using similar AR technology used in SMTOWN Live. In addition to AR, multi-view live streaming allowed audiences to watch concerts from various angles. Offline concert halls have a pretty limited view depending on the location of the seats. Taking advantage of the virtual format, which has no restrictions on vision, through six multi-views, the concert offered the chance for the audience to watch the concert from the angle they wanted the most. Notably, in the case of a close-up or a top-down angle, such views are not available at the offline concert hall, which doubles the charm of the video to the potential audience online.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, allowing the audience to selectively and actively use the viewpoints made them an active audience who could choose their own method to enjoy the concert.

Next, noticeable was "Army On Air," a reaction video screen that streams fans' faces and reaction videos in real-time on the panel surrounding BTS during the concert.<sup>57</sup> Before the concert, fans could apply in advance to participate in it. This allowed fans to participate in the concert and artists to feel like they were performing in front of fans, effectively representing the mediated liveness in which artists and audiences exist virtually, rather than physically in the same time and space.

Map of the Soul, unlike SMTOWN Live, was only available through paid ticketing. The ticket options were divided into 59,000 KRW and 71,000 KRW(exhibition package inclusive), and for non-members, it was sold at 49,000 KRW and 61,000 KRW(exhibition package inclusive).<sup>58</sup> Though the ticket price was higher than the free SMTOWN Live, it was still less than half that of offline concerts, increasing the accessibility of audiences to some extent. Also, Map of the Soul was more closed because it was only available on its own platform prepared by the entertainment agency. This may have been a barrier for ordinary audiences who do not belong to the BTS fandom. Also, the multi-view screen expanded the audience's choice, but there was a limitation in that it did not produce great utility due to occasionally poor connection depending on the audience's own internet infrastructure.<sup>59</sup>

In the end, Map of the Soul attracted 993,000 people from 191 countries despite relatively poor accessibility and generated at least 49.1 billion KRW in ticket revenue alone and 55.9 billion KRW when commercial fan goods were included.<sup>60</sup><sup>61</sup> This is an enormous audience that is hardly possible in offline concerts. Considering the situation in the K-pop industry, where offline concert profits were expected to be zero, it is a remarkable achievement because the ticket price was even lower than usual. This implies that K-pop, whose profits relied on offline performances, will also be able to take a more diverse approach by utilizing both online and offline channels.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, Map of the Soul has shown the possibility of online concerts as a new profit model to reach a broader range of consumers.

### ***Bangkyuseok Concert***

The last example is the smallest level of concerts held personally by an individual artist. Kyuhyun, a member of Super Junior, organized and streamed his own concerts on YouTube and Twitch to communicate with fans. Kyuhyun already has a fairly solid personal fandom as a solo singer and a Super Junior member. Whereas the other two examples maximized the visual aspects, this concert was an online concert where an individual artist sang on a free streaming platform focusing on communicating with fans. Although advanced technology for stage art was not utilized, since online performances are easier to access without building a high-level system<sup>63</sup>, Bangkyuseok Concert provided the artist with an opportunity to use various technologies used in platforms that have already been widely commercialized.

During the concert, various videos were often played. Usually, K-pop concerts insert

making-films, daily life, and dramas prepared in advance by artists in the middle of the concert to provide artists with time to rest and provide fans with something to watch in between the sessions. Kyuhyun also prepared a series of concert teasers and speech videos of other members of Super Junior to diversify the attractions for the audiences. Of course, it was rudimentary compared to professionally produced videos; however, this is meaningful in that it has shown the possibility that individual artists can also make use of various technologies for the concert.

Moreover, the real-time chat was opened to provide a channel for the audience to respond to the concert instantly. On the one hand, this enabled real-time communication among fans. Given that online groups have high intimacy with each other because people with similar hobbies or interests gather<sup>64</sup>, Kyuhyun's fans comfortably shared their impressions. On the other hand, it allowed real-time communication between fans and artists. For instance, he immediately fixed the camera angle when he got feedback saying the audience could not see him well. Considering there are few chances for individual communication in offline concerts, this gave fans a fresh experience of participating in the concert by directly communicating with the producer.

As mentioned earlier, however, little special technology was used for the concert's contents due to its size and the profit structure of free streaming. Also, there is a limitation in that it has not shown any dance performance, one of K-pop characteristics, due to the limited place and genre of the singing concert. In other words, Bangkyuseok Concert was a feasible form of online concert thanks to his identity as a "singer" rather than a "dancer." Therefore, such a small concert may still be challenging for K-pop group idols who focus on dynamic stage art and group dance to implement it.

For K-pop consumers who value communication with artists, the communication channel remained a necessity. Bangkyuseok Concert was an online concert that maximized direct communication, enabling fans' reactions and immediate feedback from artists. In this respect, it showed the possibility of an online concert as a channel for *ontact* communication by holding an online concert to communicate with fans.

In summary, all three examples discussed above contributed to creating unique applications of online concerts by fully utilizing the strengths expected of online concerts and expanding them. Now, using cutting-edge technologies is a basic component of online concerts. When the classical liveness concept can no longer encompass the idea of the liveness of

performances entirely<sup>65</sup>, online concerts are attempting to establish themselves as a new genre of performance culture, rather than remaining simply an alternative for offline concerts.

## Things to consider

Due to the pandemic, online concerts have already been attempted in numerous formats at various levels. Nevertheless, there are certain disadvantages to consider about online concerts. The first issue is the audience's own infrastructure of connectivity. During Map of the Soul, for example, some audiences could not enjoy the multi-view screen smoothly due to their poor internet infrastructure. No matter how hard K-pop producers work to transmit ultra-high-definition and heavy-capacity videos, of course, the result cannot be perfect if the consumer's technical infrastructure does not support them. Therefore, it is necessary not only to use cutting-edge technology on the producer's side but also to bear in mind technological inequalities and develop consumer's own infrastructure.

Secondly, even if producers try to save the liveness through advanced technology, they will naturally succeed only partially. Conventional liveness is still one of the biggest reasons consumers watch concerts when online concerts only offer mediated liveness. Therefore, due to the nature of cultural consumers who value pleasure<sup>66</sup>, the needs of the audience to enjoy physical events and experiences cannot be met. The issue of liveness challenges the artist as well. BTS leader RM, for example, mentioned that he often felt distant due to the absence of cheers from the physical audiences.<sup>67</sup> In this context, online concerts should build their own liveness since it is an essential value for both consumers and artists.

The third issue is copyright. One of the natures of cultural products is partial non-excludability, like public goods.<sup>68</sup> That means, occasionally, individuals can enjoy the cultural products without paying because they are displayed in public spaces, such as online spaces. Hence, it is impossible to track who, how many, when, and where the audiences are. In particular, free video platforms such as YouTube neutralize intellectual property rights.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, concerts always risk illegal video recording and sharing, which causes a waste of human resources. This requires consumers' awareness as technology advances.

Finally, there is the issue of capital imbalance and polarization. The examples discussed above are so-called successful cases, all online concerts arranged by large



entertainment companies.<sup>70</sup> This suggests that only big corporations with enough funds can fully utilize the functionality of online concerts, and for small agencies, it can be financially burdensome to hold high-quality online concerts using cutting-edge technology. This can eventually lead to inequality and polarization in which capital is concentrated in large companies.

Although online concerts have been commercialized faster than expected, online concert designers still have many issues to consider. How to solve these limitations in the future, therefore, remains a crucial challenge to determine whether online concerts can become a new normal, not just an alternative to offline concerts.

## Conclusion

The pandemic, on the one hand, prohibited all offline channels, giving great difficulties to the existing K-pop performance culture. However, on the other hand, online concert organizers were forced to advance their development and bring about a major change in the entire performance culture.

Internet media and cyberspace characteristics gave online concerts several advantages: price advantages, despatiality, and immediate communication. On top of that, the K-pop industry found a breakthrough with online concerts in an *untact* environment by utilizing advanced technology to enrich the contents of the concerts and diversify the concert platforms. In other words, online concerts have their own characteristics distinct from offline concerts, namely, enriching concert sensory experiences, showing a new type of participation, and increasing accessibility, which brought the K-pop consumers into an important agency of the culture while considering the producer's perspective as well. These aspects as a whole have played an essential role in making online concerts more "consumable."

Despite the advantages, there are still challenges for online concerts to consider, including the issues of consumer's infrastructure, conventional liveness, copyright, and capital imbalance and polarization. However, not all difficulties can be solved at a certain level of the agencies right away. Therefore, the development of online concerts requires careful consideration among K-pop consumers and producers, along with technology development.

In conclusion, online concerts likely will be able to coexist with offline concerts in the

post-pandemic era as the media field will continue to evolve, as it has been so far. In line with these changes, online concerts can be expected to solidify their position as a new genre that quickly adapts to the shifting media environment. As this paper has discussed, online concerts have strengths that offline concerts cannot replace and vice versa. Therefore, K-pop producers are expected to expand their profitability by utilizing both online and offline concerts. Thus, K-pop consumers will be able to selectively watch online and offline concerts depending on their situation and needs. In other words, online and offline concerts can develop into a complementary relationship that increases each other's demand and supply, strengthens each genre characteristic, and allows for more organic interaction.

So far, this paper has intensively explored K-pop's recent online concerts to discuss their sustainability and argued that it has the potential to be a new genre of performance culture. From this point of view, K-pop's online concerts deserve more scholarly attention. Therefore, a follow-up study is proposed as follows. Research on the experiences of overseas audiences who watched K-pop online concerts is needed. Despite the emphasis on K-pop's international fans' cultural and global attributes, current research on K-pop fandom is limited to social media and examines their motivation and acceptance of the culture. Also, research focusing on online concerts is still limited to domestic fans' experiences. Studying the online concert experience of overseas fans, thus, can contribute to further understanding the actual input of international fans on overall K-pop culture by recognizing online space as a transnational and transparent space.

## Declaration of Interest Statement

I, Suhyun Lee, hereby declare that my article manuscript on the topic of “*Alternative or “New Normal”*”: *Shifting Trend of K-pop Concerts in COVID-19 Time.*”

- a) is the result of my own independent work and
- b) makes use of no other sources or materials other than those referenced and
- c) has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Sincerely,  
Suhyun Lee

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## Notes

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- <sup>66</sup> Yun, *Cultural Marketing Strategy*, 97p.
- <sup>67</sup> Hye-woon Lee, “75만명이 본 ‘방방콘’...90분간 260억 벌었다(“Bangbang Con” that 750,000 people watched...I earned 26 billion won in 90 minutes.),” *Chosunilbo*, June 2020.  
[https://www.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2020/06/15/2020061500160.html](https://www.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2020/06/15/2020061500160.html)
- <sup>68</sup> Yun, *Cultural Marketing Strategy*, 32-3p.
- <sup>69</sup> Wook-in Baek, “글로벌 혼종화 시대의 지적재산권(Intellectual property rights in the era of global hybridization),” in *코로나19 이후의 한류(The Korean Wave after COVID-19)*, edited by KOFICE, 2021, 188-189p.
- <sup>70</sup> As a small level of the individual concert, Bangkyuseok Concert did not make much profit because it was streamed free of charge via YouTube and Twitch.