K-Pop's Ingredients of Success

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the training hours, physical appearances, and on-screen personalities as potential factors of success in today's K-pop industry in an attempt to understand such global success. The top 10 most popular male K-pop groups were chosen as this paper's samples based on the criteria of album sales and music video views. The research method of content analysis was employed to measure certain aspects of each factor; the total training hours, average facial scores based on rules of symmetry, and frequencies of introverted or extroverted behaviors were collected for each group. For the majority, groups that went through extensive training periods, had high facial symmetry scores, and leaned more toward introverted personalities on average were found to be among the most popular and successful. It is important to note, however, that the last outcome may have been due to South Korea's societal expectations and culture.

Introduction

One of the easiest ways to understand a culture is through its pop culture or entertainment industry: the types of music, films, television programs, and more can determine multiple facets of a community in terms of its beliefs, standards, and norms (Psychology Today, 2009). For instance, Hollywood stars in America help the average citizen, even outside the home country, to get a taste of its sense of fashion, ideologies, and preferences. Among many other societies that are diffusing across borders due to globalization, South Korea is one of the growingly recognized countries. *Hallyu*, translated as the "Korean Wave", describes the increased popularity of South Korean pop culture, ranging from drama series, skincare routines, food, and most significantly, music (Romano, 2018).

Korean pop (K-pop) music has grown to prominence in the past five to ten years from local to more international audiences (Romano, 2018). According to Yecies and Shim (2014), researchers from the University of Wollongong and New South Wales respectively, K-pop is defined as "a type of contemporary music performed (and consumed) by teens and twenty-somethings across a variety of genres", and in foreign critics' words, " trend-setting and dazzlingly choreographed", "younger, more animated, better dressed, [and] better looking" (p.1). In fact, the *Time* magazine in 2012 and Yecies and Shim described K-pop as "South Korea's greatest export" and "a world leader in an intensely competitive [music industry] field" respectively (pp.1,4).

Furthermore, as K-pop continues to globalize, certain aspects of it are becoming globalized along with it. Many researchers have explored such aspects in response to the rapidly proliferating phenomenon: there are evaluative papers on beauty perceptions, body images, and sexuality that K-pop poses, or simply informative ones on the history or difficulties of K-pop stars. However, truly extensive, in-depth analyses on the topic are scant. This research paper is unique as it investigates aspects of K-pop at a collective level among males while other researches mostly describe such aspects in general terms without looking into particular gender or groups.

The specific parameters evaluated are the training hours, physical appearances, and on-screen personalities among 10 most popular male K-pop stars in order to discern how such factors influence success and potentially lead to globalization. This study will utilize a quantitative research method of a content analysis -- a method of summarizing a form of content by counting specific aspects of it--in which the results are numerical (Audience Dialogue, 2014).

Predicted results are that an average training duration of at least 10,000 hours, proportional facial features scoring at least 7 out of 10 (scale based on rules of symmetries), and extroverted personalities would most likely lead to a higher chance of success than its alternatives. The ultimate goal that this research also wishes to achieve from the dissection of the three aforementioned components is an enhanced understanding of the significance of Asian beauty perceptions, work ethics, and mannerisms that are expanding internationally, indicating a shift in the modern societal norms.

Literature Review

In order to fully comprehend this research and its purpose, it is essential to be familiar with what K-pop is in the first place, and how the aforementioned independent variables of training, looks, and personalities can impact stars' levels of success. The topic of K-pop in general has been introduced by several scholars in the past and is becoming growingly popular globally. For instance, Oh and Lee (2013), a professor at the Korea University and a PhD candidate of International Studies in Yonsei University, provide a descriptive study on K-pop by recalling its origin dating back to the past of South Korea and its resulting social impact today. They state that unlike the positive perception of K-pop today, the music industry in South Korea's past had been widely unaccepted and censored by the government, only beginning to change in 1992 as the appearance of the "legendary boy band" (p.112) called Seo Taiji and Boys resulted in a huge success.

Similarly, another research study by Jin and Yoon (2017) for the Graduate School of Communication and Arts in Yonsei University defines "the rapid growth in Korea's cultural industries and their exports of cultural products in Asia mainly since 1997" as the *Hallyu* (p.2241). Along with identifying a similar era for K-pop's origins, both studies also mention increased government support and recent development of technologies in shaping K-pop's perceptions today. While descriptive in history and explanatory of external factors such as technology and government in relation to K-pop, these sources essentially do not acknowledge any internal factors within the K-pop stars themselves as possibilities of the industry's success.

As for the three specific components posed as potential indicators of K-pop's success, there are a few descriptive papers concerning the training hours of K-pop idols. They typically break down the structure of South Korea's K-pop agencies and their training system in place for prospective idols. In a master thesis written by Kong (2016) that explores how both external sources and internal organizational strategies of South Korea's K-pop industry contribute to the globalization of K-pop, such a training system firstly begins with discovering, and subsequently casting, potentially talented stars. After this recruitment, all trainees go through a training regime, which includes, but are not limited to, programs such as singing, dancing, acting, foreign languages, personality, communication skills, and even plastic surgery and humor for variety shows. According to Kong (2016), some of the K-pop groups with the longest training period lasted as long as 13 years, with some of the shortest still lasting around at least 3 years. Furthermore, based on an interview by a girl group called GFriend, practicing hours per day was approximately 14 to 15 hours (Kong, 2016). Padget (2017) corroborates such fact in her paper which illustrates all the difficulties and disadvantages of being a K-pop idol. Based on these studies, updates on the issue of training hours of K-pop stars simply seem to be opinions on its ethicalities or deconstructions rather than meaningful implications such as how it could influence future success.

However, in Malcolm Gladwell's book "Outliers", Gladwell theorizes that there is a measurable approach of the effort and work it takes for one to become successful--that is, if at least 10,000 hours are devoted into one's area of expertise. According to several of his case studies on individuals renown for their fame, wealth, and success, such as Bill Gates, they all have had histories of committing 10,000 hours or more of their time practicing whatever made them so famous. This rule is an implicative discovery of success and its possible influencers.

Apart from training hours, physical appearances is another factor of consideration when looking for imminent K-pop stars. Park (2019) in particular from the Archives of Plastic surgery, a publisher site for the Korean Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons, investigates the attitudes and beliefs concerning aesthetic surgery in both young men and women of South Korea according to electronic surveys and interviews. The results indicated that for both

genders, personal dissatisfaction was the most common reason for undertaking aesthetic surgery, especially since South Korea falls victim to lookism-- "prejudice or discrimination based on physical appearance" (p.612). By way of illustration, while physical attractiveness was believed to be correlated to positive stereotypes like popularity, unattractiveness was linked to negative stereotypes that hindered employment opportunities, such as being perceived as "lazy, antisocial, and incompetent" (Park, 2019, p.613).

Park (2019) also specifically addressed the changing beauty standards for males as a result and the "rapidly gaining popularity" of plastic surgery among them (p.615); 14.8% of males in his study reported to have undergone plastic surgery in the past, and 40% of the males who haven't were also interested in receiving such surgeries. In fact, Sharma and Shweta (2018) stated in their article from the International Journal for Advanced Research and Development analyzing the South Korean market targeting men for the cosmetic industry that South Korean men were the highest consumers of cosmetics, with the main reason behind such a phenomenon being that makeup bestowed confidence.

In support of the prevalence of lookism in South Korea gradually affecting all genders of the country, Gelezeau (2015), a French alumni from the International Institute for Asian Studies, also depicts the implications physical appearance holds in Korea in her paper discussing South Koreans' infatuation with luxury goods and cosmetic surgery. She states that physical appearance directly dictates social status in South Korea, where the Korean term *chemyon* refers to the "honour" and "prestige" a person holds solely from their faces (p.10). Therefore, in South Korea, beauty is "a sort of moral imperative" and is a "necessity to function properly within society" (Gelezeau, 2015, p.10). Despite providing meaningful interpretations of cultural innuendos and impacts of facial looks in South Korea, Park, Sharma and Shweta, and Gelezeau's works are all nevertheless limited in the sense that they merely mention the growing sensitivity towards aesthetics and beauty among men without actual, in-depth dissection of the issue, such as what particular features uphold one's social status and success.

On the other hand, Holiday and Hwang (2012), other research contributors of the Archives of Plastic Surgery, do actually address specific facial features popularizing among men in South Korea in their article exploring the high levels of cosmetic surgery in South Korea by drawing on feminist perspectives. They articulate that young men in their twenties seek a "softer" image which mimics the image of "boy-heroes in popular Korean and Japanese comics" (p.60). The authors further elaborate that these looks have begun to be epitomized in Japanese boy bands and Korean drama series since the 1990s, with specific features including a "less angular jaw, double eyelids and a prominent nose tip" (p.61). Holiday and Hwang (2012) also note that such characteristics may be preferred due to the desire to be westernized and reach a "white norm and avoid racism" (p.65). Similar to Gelezau's claims, they conclude that "Korean men in their twenties and thirties are more predisposed to cosmetic surgery" since good looks and certain physiognomy "are so equated with success" (p.74). Such studies, while definitely much more detailed on physical features in relation to success in the male perspective, could still be improved by referencing more actual and real male samples as examples.

In relation to on-screen personalities that may lead to success, studies that investigate personality traits that appear more appealing among celebrities do exist. Lunardo, Gergaud, and Livat (2015) do so by gathering data from *Epoll* Market Research among the U.S. population on their perception of more than 3,000 celebrities in the country regarding the personality dimensions of sophistication, sincerity, competence, excitement, and rudeness. According to the results, all aforementioned dimensions except for rudeness were found to have positive effects on a celebrity's appeal or attractiveness. Meanwhile, similar research specifically focused on K-pop celebrities at a collective level does not exist, once again, making this research paper unique and niche.

There are a few scholars who have briefly touched on the issue of personality among K-pop stars though, such as what kind of personality traits or behaviors they are expected to exhibit. In Cho (2017)'s master thesis investigating the motives, opinions, and attitudes of American fans on K-pop, she explains that "each member of a K-pop boy group is given an idealistic personality that many girls desire" and vice versa. For instance, female audiences may prefer a man who is "sensitive and gentle", "masculine and forceful", or both (p.22). Moreover, Cho (2017) emphasizes that K-pop idols must personify the "chakhan" kid, translated as kind in Korean, of an "honest, principled youth,

implying innocence" (p.22). Cho continues on that such concept has "spiritual and metaphysical overtones and embodies respect for and conformity to traditional social values"; therefore, it is rare to find a rebellious K-pop idol, and fans show "little tolerance for defamation and heresy" (p.22).

While Cho (2017)'s study does already provide some common personality traits among K-pop stars that are preferred by the masses, it does not mention the universally known major personality traits: extroversion vs. introversion. According to the Myers & Briggs Foundation, the former is described as "outgoing" or as a "people person", whereas the latter is described as "reflective" or "reserved" (para.6 & 8). There is some gossip on which personality types famous Hollywood stars and celebrities possess regarding extroversion and introversion, but properly conducted research on the traits does not seem to exist. This particular paper can therefore enhance previous studies by looking into those two major traits, as well as executing a content analysis on them as concrete proof rather than mere claims.

In sum, although past studies have analyzed the success of K-pop in various ways, none attempted to do so in a level as focused and specialized as this research paper. Most papers turn to external aspects of success such as digital technology and online platforms like Youtube as the main contributors of K-pop's success. While a few of them do acknowledge internal factors like the training regime, physical appearance, and on-screen personalities, many are rather simply informative on the surface level without further in-depth level analyses. This research paper will evaluate concrete measures on such topics based on real samples to enhance the aforementioned previous studies.

Methodology

To test the hypothesis of the research question's three factors mentioned in the introduction, a content analysis research method was used in which data on the training hours, physical appearances, and on-screen personalities of the 10 K-pop groups were collected and then each tested in different ways, assuming that all values followed a normal distribution. As for the 10 most popular groups of reference, the ranks were formed by averaging the highest 2018's album sales and 2009-2019's music video views. The mean/average (x), standard deviation(S_x), and p-value (p) for each of the three components were also calculated via a graphing calculator (model TI-84 Plus CE). The p was specifically based on the null hypothesis and the alternative hypothesis. The results were displayed on scatter plots created from Google Sheets.

$$x = \frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n} x_i \qquad\qquad S_x = \sqrt{\frac{(x-\overline{x})^2}{n}}$$

In order to calculate the average training hours, firstly, data on the length of training years (rounded to whole numbers) for each member of the 10 groups were collected. Secondly, 15 hours--chosen as the standard training hours per day according to the articles mentioned in the Literature Review--was multiplied to 365 days (1 year) and to the total number of training years of each member. Most of the data relied on 3 to 4 of the same external sources like K-pop pages and websites due to the lack of self-reports on the issue. As for the data itself, the point in which the K-pop stars had joined and signed a contract with a specific company to begin training was considered as the starting point to count up years until their debut. The null and alternative hypotheses for training hours were that each K-pop group would, on average, meet at least 10,000 hours and exceed 10,000 hours (respectively) as shown below; the results were calculated by a function called 't-test'.

$$H_0: \mu = 10,000$$
$$H_a: \mu > 10,000$$

As to find the ideal physical appearance that highly correlated to success, an online software tool run by expert photo editors in the United States since 2009 called Pink Mirror was used to score each K-pop star's face on a scale from 1 to 10. The scale was based on two generic facial dimension rules concerning the overall symmetry or proportion of the face called the 'Rule of Fifths' and 'Rule of Thirds'. The former stated that a proportional face consisted of five vertical dimensions and that the base of the nose was as wide as the eye's length. Along the same note, the latter defined proportional as three even horizontal divisions (1-hairline to the top of the brows, 2- the top of the brows to

the bottom of the nose, and 3- the bottom of the nose to the chin). All in all, a high score indicated greater facial symmetry and subsequently, an overall physical attractiveness.

To begin with the scoring process, photos of each individual of the 10 K-pop groups were first gathered. In order to receive accurate scores, only the photos that appeared closely to an Identification (ID) photo of a centered face looking ahead with neutral (subtle at best) expressions and under good lighting were selected. Most of such images were those from the South Korean news portals. When these images were input for a score analysis on the online software, detailed descriptions on the facial features, such as analyses on face shape, eye size, nose shape, chin shape, and skin, were available as well as the overall score.

Because the software automatically photoshopped the images as a part of its photo-editing tasks, it applied a makeup filter and face slimming effect at the end, providing two scores as a result for both before and after the edit. However, for the purpose of this research, only the raw score of the initial image without any alterations was considered. All calculations for this component of the research also employed the 't-test' function. The letter grade of C (7/10) was used as the standard guideline of passing as an average facial score, specifically referring to academia, for the null and alternative hypotheses (MastersPortal, 2019). The hypotheses were being equal to or greater than the score of 7, respectively:

$$H0: \mu = 7$$
$$Ha: \mu > 7$$

Finally, the method for assessing on-screen personalities was based on the spectrum of extroversion and introversion. Each side of the spectrum was defined by four observable behaviors that were associated with its personality trait, as recommended by an expert advisor, David Emch, from a premier counseling center in Chiang Mai, Thailand called Cornerstone Counseling Foundation (along with referencing some of the common types of behaviors shown within the K-pop industry in reality TV shows). Each behavior from one spectrum (extroversion) was also directly contradictory to the behavior of the other spectrum (introversion), as listed in the following respectively: direct eye contact vs. looking down/avoiding eye contact (to the camera), big vs. small hand-clapping gestures (roughly defined as the gesture being as big as or smaller than the shoulder's width), laughing openly vs. with mouths covered by hands, and both hands openly to the side vs. gathered together. However, it is important to note that these behaviors are not one-hundred percent, accurate indicators of either the introverted or extroverted personality traits.

These pre-selected behaviors' frequencies were then recorded whilst watching a South Korean reality TV show called "Weekly Idol"--one of the longest-running and thereby, a reputable South Korean variety show that first aired in 2011 and still does every Wednesday-- that all 10 K-pop groups selected for this paper have appeared in. The recorded frequencies on both kinds of behaviors were then averaged. For this part of the research, the calculator performed a 'paired t-test' between the two behavioral categories using the t-test function. The null hypothesis stated that the difference between the two behaviors of introversion and extroversion showed no change, while the alternative hypothesis stated that extroverted behaviors were shown more. The equations were of the following:

$$H0: \mu_1 - \mu_2 = 0$$
$$Ha: \mu_1 - \mu_2 > 0$$

Results

As mentioned in the methodology section, the data for average training hours, facial scores, and on-screen personalities of each of the ten K-pop groups were collected in different ways. The general trend for the training hours of all groups was that they all surpassed the minimum amount of 10,000 hours required to reach success, as initially hypothesized in this paper, making the p to be statistically significant at around 0.0015. In fact, values from the lowest to

highest ranged from 11,732 hours to as much as 37,230 hours (rounded). The overall sample mean of all groups was approximately 19,073 hours, with the following standard deviation at around 7,168 hours.

$$p = 0.001549$$
$$x = 19{,}073.14$$
$$Sx = 7{,}168.066$$

There were three groups that fell within the early ranges of 10,000 hours of 11,732 hours, 13,003 hours, and 13,688 in chronological order. Interestingly, these groups were BTS, Stray Kids, and SHINee, in which BTS ranked top 1 for popularity while the other two ranked near the bottom of 10 and 9 respectively. There was only one group, iKON, in the middle range with 16,425 hours (also ranked somewhat in the middle range for popularity at 7th place). The rest of the groups' training hours were in the high range of 18,000 to over 20,000 hours, and correspondingly, were also usually placed in the upper range for popularity rankings. However, there was one notable outlier group, NU'EST, with an average of 37,230 training hours. There are as much as 16,699 hours of difference between NU'EST and the second highest (most hours) group, WINNER, with 20,531 hours. Despite such a high value, however, NU'EST is not necessarily one of the more popular groups within the top 10; they are ranked 6th place.
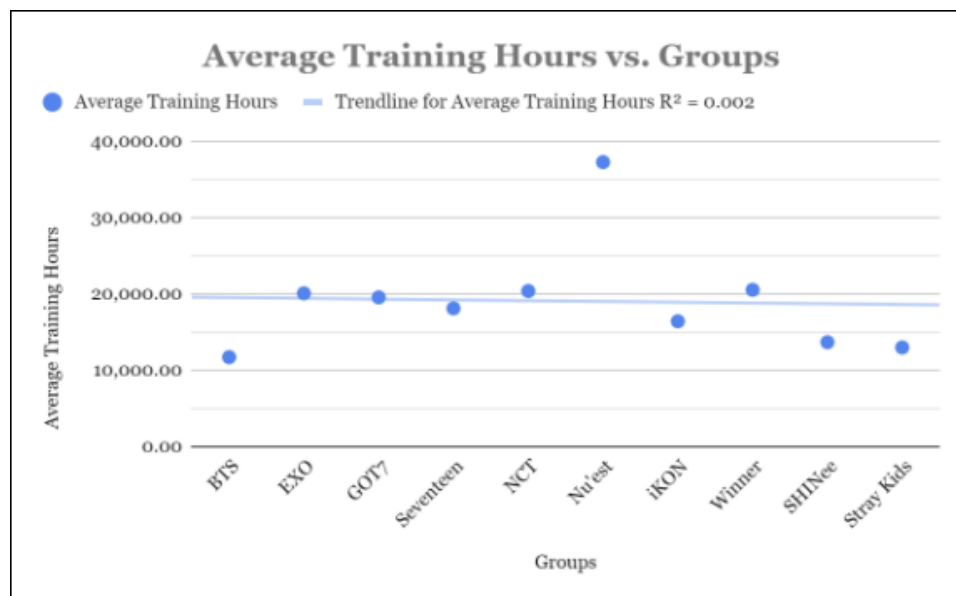

Figure 1. Average Training Hours vs. Groups.

As for the facial scores, just as the training hours, all K-pop groups on average exceeded (to an even greater extent than those of training hours) the predicted score of 7/10. In fact, every single group had a score of 9 or above on average (with little differences between one another in terms of decimal points). As a result, the p for the hypotheses regarding this area was even lower than 0.001, meaning that statistically, the standard error is extremely low. The mean of all groups' facial scores was around 9.7, and the standard deviation was around 0.2.

$$x = 9.69495$$
$$Sx = 0.207751$$
$$p < 0.001$$

The lowest score was 9.42 from the group EXO, who, surprisingly, was the second most popular group of all 10. Directly contradicting such a result, the group with the highest overall score of 9.998 belonged to SHINee, who ranked in second last place. As for the lowest scores within individuals (not groups), they were still in the 8 range as well.
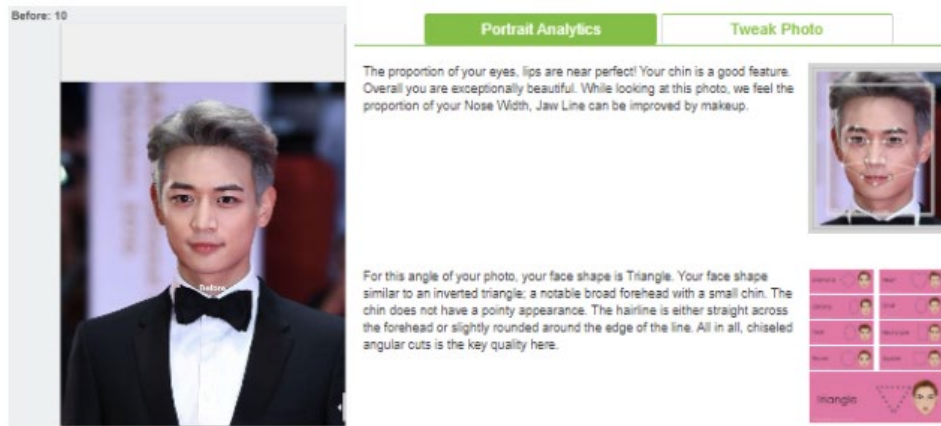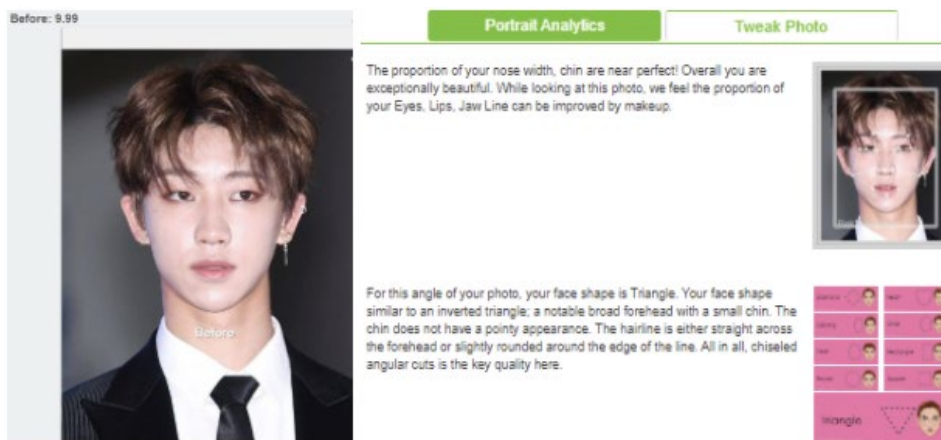

Figure 2. Sample Facial Score no.1.

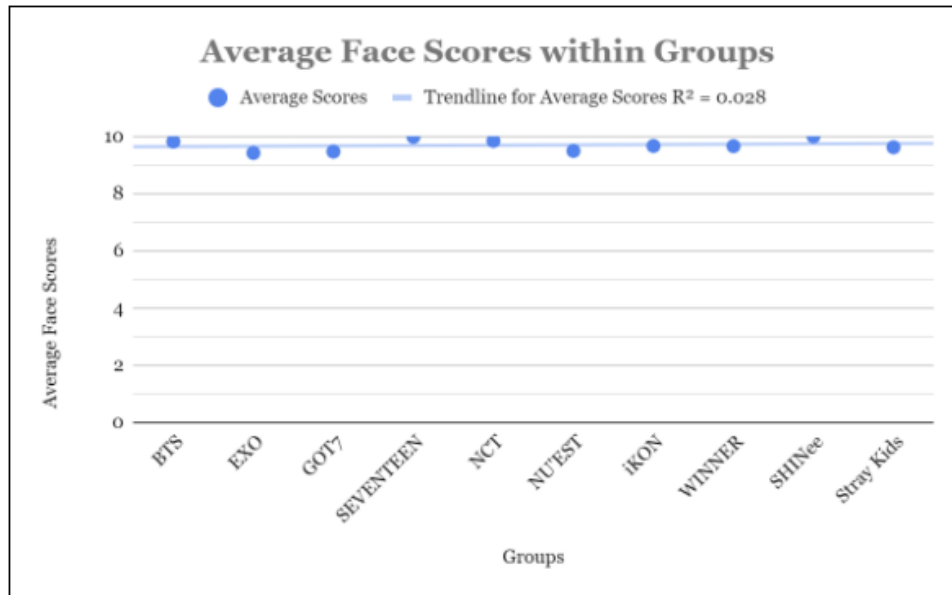**Figure 2.** Sample Facial Score no.2.

Figure 4. Average Face Scores within Groups.

Finally, the results of on-screen personalities have turned out to prove the complete opposite of this research's initial hypothesis that most groups would show more tendencies of extroversion. The average frequencies of introverted behaviors per minute were between 1-2 for most groups (7 of them), while that of extroverted behaviors were less than once per minute for all groups. The calculated averages of the frequencies of behaviors were rounded from decimal points into whole numbers, as one could not perform anything less or more than a whole behavior (such as half a behavior per minute). Overall, the *p* was greater than the significance level of 0.05, meaning that the observation did not provide convincing evidence that the average amount of extroverted acts per minute was greater than the introverted acts per minute for popular groups (or, in other words, that extroversion equated to greater popularity):

$$p = 0.9987$$

A notable result out of all 10 groups, however, was one group that showed exceptionally high tendencies for introverted traits as a whole than others: Stray Kids exhibited as much as 3 introverted behaviors per minute based on calculation.
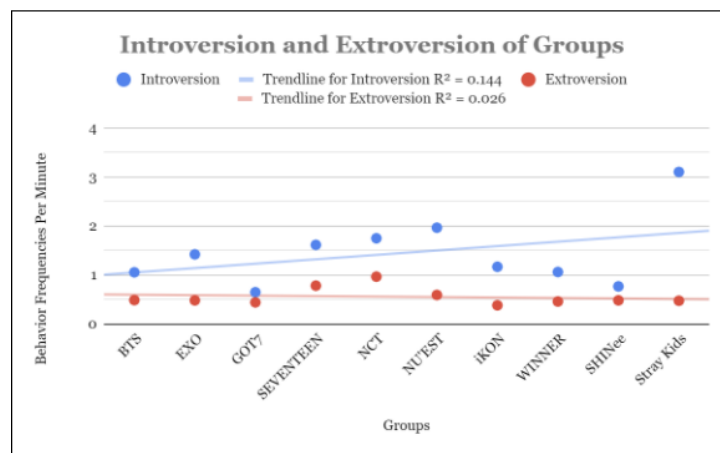

Figure 5. Introversion and Extroversion of Groups.

Discussion

In this section, this research's limitations, potential implications, and future directions are evaluated. In terms of implications, the general trend for training hours being that each group's training hours correspond relatively well with their popularity rank implies the greater the amount of hours, the greater the popularity. In other words, most groups' efforts appear to have been justified by the public through eventual fame. Having said that, there are definitely still exceptions such as groups like NU'EST. As for physical appearances, that all 10 groups far exceeded the average score of 7/10 shows that physical appearances definitely do contribute as an influential factor of success and popularity. That the scores don't directly correspond with ranks, however, indicates that there may be other external factors that play a bigger role for the utmost popularity.

Furthermore, the pre-selected behaviors to assess on-screen personalities leading to extroversion and introversion are, as previously mentioned in the results section, not one-hundred percent accurate indicators of such traits. There are no set behaviors that determine a personality trait; it is rather the personality that helps determine resulting behaviors (Emch, 2020). Thus, the pre-selected behaviors are simply those that are very likely to be linked with extroversion and introversion at best. Put in another way, the result that most popular K-pop groups are introverted is not a factual statement; there would have to be more future studies conducted to strengthen such a correlation or confirm such a claim. In addition, one possible explanation of why the particular group Stray Kids leaned much more towards exhibiting introverted behaviors per minute than others is culture. South Korean culture and society puts great emphasis on humility and politeness, and such traits tend to be more closely related to introverted acts, such as being more reserved, keeping to oneself, avoiding grand gestures that may offend anyone, and so on.

In fact, as mentioned in the Literature Review, it is rare to find a rebellious K-pop star because they are usually expected to act "conservatively", "deliver Asian virtues such as politeness, respect towards seniority, filial piety, hard-working (sic) and humility", and are rejected otherwise (Kong, 2016, p.87). As expected, Stray Kids are, indeed, the least popular or famous out of all the other groups in this research, as well as also being the group with the least seniority. In summary, introversion may not have necessarily been one of the key pathways to success; it may have been a mere product of conformity to South Korea's social norms.

An issue that could also arise as a limitation from the assessment of on-screen personalities is that the recorded frequencies of behavioral tendencies are entirely subjective. In other words, the criteria of eye contacts, hand-clapping gestures, ways of laughter, and hand positions are solely based on the researcher's perceptions and judgments, making the data prone for human errors or biases. A potential bias, for instance, is the observer bias--when the researcher subconsciously projects his/her expectations onto the research and focuses only on the aspects that help support the hypotheses (cherry-picking). Finally, despite this research's concentration on training hours, physical appearances, and on-screen personalities, they are not the sole indicators of success. Variables other than the aforementioned three factors may just as well lead to success.

Although this research is not generalizable to all populations and focuses on a niche sample, it does represent the K-pop industry and South Korea's society fairly well. An overall indication that this research makes about Korea's work ethics in regards to success is that success can only be achieved through hard work, effort, and time (as represented in all successful K-pop groups having trained over 10,000 hours). Good looks may also serve as an additional privilege, and introverted individuals may be favored due to South Korea's customs.

Such overtones are meaningful and far-reaching due to the globalization of K-pop nowadays and its permeation through various cultures. This could then lead to the idea that the norms and expectations for success shown through the K-pop industry will pass onto the average citizens not only of South Korea, but also of all the other countries that consume and are affected by its widespread influence. This transference of the industry's ways yields a potentially significant shift in modern societal norms in general and provides a meaningful suggestion of the recognition and adaptations of the Eastern cultures in a relatively Western-dominated world. For future studies that wish to explore the same or similar issues, investigating other potential factors of success not included in this particular paper, as well as employing a larger sample size for maximized accuracy, are some ideal approaches.

Conclusion

In summation, the data of this research indicates that successful K-pop stars most popular among the masses are, in general, those that put a lot of effort into their trainings by surpassing at least 10,000 hours, that reach the average facial scores of 7/10, and that show greater tendencies toward an introverted personality trait. All in all, the initial hypotheses of this paper were proven right for all but the last component regarding on-screen personalities. For personalities, the direct contradiction of the original prediction was proven true.

Acknowledgments

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