

Escapism Through Music: K-Pop and Emotional Support

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Music has played an important role for escape throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Huddleston, 2020). Huddleston (2020) notes that during a time when people were predominantly stuck at home, music acted as a form of travel; “Music provides stress relief, can help ease pain in some cases, and is an ideal getaway when literal vacations are taken off the table” (para. 5). Music has a way of transporting us to a different time and place for a little while, and for many this can be a much-needed way to escape from their stressful busy lives.

One musical genre that is often praised by fans for being a great form of escape is Korean pop music, referred to as K-Pop. This genre has a complex web of interconnected fandoms dedicated to its various artists, and fans are extremely dedicated to the groups they support. The fandoms themselves are often noted as being a community that fans can go to for escape, but also for emotional support or comfort (Yeo, 2020). The sense of community found within K-Pop fandoms is further heightened by the fact that each K-Pop fandom has a unique fandom name that is used by fans and the K-Pop artists themselves. For example, fans of the K-Pop group Seventeen are called Carats, fans of Strays Kids are called Stay and fans of TXT are called MOA. While being fun and cute, these fandom names also have important meanings behind them. Fans of Seventeen are called Carats because their fans are a precious gem to the group, and they make the diamond (Seventeen) shine brighter. Fans of Stray Kids are called Stay partly because it is a play on the word Stray in the group’s name, but also because the fans are what support and make Stray Kids stay. Fans of TXT are called MOA, which stands for Moments of Alwaysness, because the fans and TXT come together to form one dream together. There is a sense of unity that comes with being part of one of these K-Pop fandoms, and that can be an important comforting relationship for many fans. For young adults and teens particularly, not having school and the social connection that comes with that because of the pandemic can be a big stressor in their life. Fandoms can give young adults a sense of community and social connection in the digital world and allow them to connect with other fans all around the world.

K-Pop is often linked to being an emotional support for many fans, and this is explored by Amanda Yeo (2020) in an article they wrote for *Mashable*. Through interviews with various K-Pop fans Yeo (2020) explores the connection between K-Pop articles and the emotional comfort they provide to fans all around the world. The comfort fans feel often comes from various sources, “these artists inspire and reassure people through their music, livestreams, and even just their general personalities, encouraging fans and offering comfort through difficult times. Such positive influences can improve fans’ psychological wellbeing, especially when comfort is difficult to find elsewhere” (para. 5). This highlights an important aspect of K-Pop, and that is its seemingly endless stream of content for fans to consume and interact with. Because of the quantity but also variety of content that is produced by each of these K-Pop groups, fans have so much content to explore and to fit to their different moods or emotional needs.

While many western artists might release a new album every few years or so, K-Pop groups release mini-albums or full-length albums roughly every 3-5 months. When a group releases a new album there is a period of promotion that comes with it. During this period the group will take part in stage performances of the album’s title track nearly every day, and often you will see the group appearing on various Korean variety shows where they get to play games and show off their personalities. The comeback period for a K-Pop group is jam packed with content for fans to enjoy every single day.

When a group is not promoting an album there are different types of content that is often released. Many K-Pop groups have their own show that is released on their YouTube channel, usually weekly. One example of these shows is Seventeen’s *Going Seventeen* series, often referred to as GoSe

by fans. This series is normally released weekly on Wednesdays, and episodes range in their content from scavenger hunts to karaoke to other fun skits that the members wanted to try. Each episode is hilarious and engaging and give fans tons of content to watch but also to talk about with each other. The K-Pop group Treasure also has a series that is released weekly that is called *Treasure Map*, often referred to as T-Map by fans. The show followed the group as they worked towards their debut in its first season. Now into its second season, the show has a similar style to *Going Seventeen* where the content of each episode shifts weekly and is often focused on showing the members during their day-to-day activities.

Apart from group shows or series that are posted to YouTube, some idols also weekly live sessions with fans on a platform called VLive. One of these series called *Chan's Room* by Bang Chan of Stray Kids has become a great source of comfort for fans. Chan having been born in Australia speaks fluent English and Korean, and switches between the two languages during his live sessions to better content with fans all around the world. Chan often talks to fans about mental health, anxiety and other social issues they are dealing with during these live sessions, and *Chan's Room* for many fans has become a safe space for them to go on a weekly basis for comfort and escape.

These different types of content being readily available online and mostly for free is great for teens and young adults. There is not necessarily a financial requirement, which means young adults can freely enjoy this content without having to find a way to financially pay for it. Because of the decreased socialization for many young adults due to the pandemic, having so much and such varied content available is also wonderful for entertainment and distraction from the stress of what is going on around them. Further, all the things discussed thus far are just extras on top of the music that K-Pop groups create and promote. Different K-Pop groups often have different styles when it comes to the music that they release and often experiment with different genres regularly. Because of this, there is a wide range of music being created that can cater to anyone's musical preferences.

A lot of music that K-Pop groups release often have positive or motivational messages for fans. D.O. from the group EXO released a solo track in 2019 called *That's Okay*. This track shares the message that it is okay to be sad and overwhelmed sometimes, and that you don't always have to pretend to be okay. Similarly, the song *My Pace* by Stray Kids shares a message that it is okay to take your time with things and not rush to keep up with everyone else around you. The song highlights the importance of moving at your own speed and pace with things in life. The song *Crown* by TXT shares an important message regarding it being okay to be different, and that you will find people who accept and love what makes you different. The song makes an important note that horns, which are often viewed as monstrous, can be a crown from a different perspective. Finally, *My Treasure* by Treasure focuses on the music Treasure creates being a comfort or escape to their fans. The music video shows imagery of fans struggling with school and home stress and turning to the groups music to escape and cheer themselves up. There are many more K-Pop songs that are focused directly on providing comfort to listeners, however, there is another way that this music can be a comfort and escape for fans.

Apart from sharing meaningful messages, the entertainment aspect of K-Pop music videos, dance practices and stages further provides an escape or comfort to fans. The K-Pop group Seventeen is well-known for having detailed and synchronized choreography, as seen with their *Home;Run* dance practice video. Their incredibly precise dance routines can be calming or satisfying to watch and help distract from possible stress or discomfort. Similarly, incredibly elaborate stages, such as the one that The Boyz did for the show *Road to Kingdom*. The performance took their previously released song *Reveal* and added a revolutionary *Hunger Games* twist to it, thus the performance being called *Reveal (Catching Fire)*. Focusing on the visual aspects of performance and dance can take your mind off other matters for a little bit, and act as a short escape from your troubles. Finally, cinematic or music videos with complex storylines can give fans a few minutes of much needed distraction. The music video for *Burn It* by Golden Child is one example, as the music video focuses on a zombie plot with acting done by

the group's members. The video is longer in length than your average music video and grips your attention with its intense imagery and plot.

K-Pop is a genre that gives fans more than just incredible music. The genre and groups often act as an emotional support for fans and provide them with a way to comfortably escape their everyday life. K-Pop is particularly great for teens and young adults because it is something they can focus on for an extended period, due to the quantity of content, across different moods, because of the variety of content, and as emotional support, both from the music itself and extra video content. Further, many K-Pop idols are between the ages of 15 and 24, which can help young adults feel more connected with the artists that are around their own age. K-Pop is such a diverse genre and fan space that there is a little something there for everyone to enjoy. We hope that this article shed a little light on K-Pop as a genre and a fandom, and maybe even sparked your interest enough to check out some of the groups or music discussed.

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