

Viewing Modern Korean Social Issues Through BTS' Lyrics:

The Life of the Korean Youth in the Contemporary Education System and Society

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Abstract

One of the social issues that is commonly addressed in Korean popular media is the education system and its impacts on students' self-worth. This is a topic that the K-pop group BTS addressed frequently in their earlier music—particularly in the songs “No More Dream,” “N.O,” “Spine Breaker” (“*Deunggol Beureikeo*”), and “Silver Spoon” (“*Baepsae*”). Although these songs were not in the Billboard charts, they formed the group's image and identity as a band. Despite the fact that their songs are specific to the Korean context, their themes are universal so that a global audience can still resonate or connect in their own way. While it should be kept in mind that not all media depict real life well, this paper focuses on lyrics from four early songs of BTS and observe how well BTS captures the current zeitgeist or cultural climate of contemporary Korean students' and young adults' struggles and hardships. This paper was able to observe the social conflicts and struggles youth have in contemporary Korea. Based on the statistics and information provided by the Korean government and other research, it can be concluded that BTS represented such realities rather well.

Keywords: BTS, Korean popular culture, modern Korean society, social issues, education, adolescence

Introduction

There are numerous studies about Korean popular culture and its impact throughout time. The term Korean Wave, or *Hallyu*, is the phenomenon where the popularity of Korean popular culture increases outside of South Korea (from now on Korea). The initial *Hallyu* occurred in other Asian countries and remained there, but nowadays it has also spread to other continents and states, literally throughout the world (Chung et al., 2021; Jieun Jung, 2019; Kang & Lee, 2019; Yang, 2022). Prominent Korean popular culture content in the early 2020s include K-pop, movies, and dramas: namely BTS, *Parasite*, and *Squid Game*. All of this content made history in its own way and there have been numerous academic discussions of each in diverse subject areas. Borrowing Joseph Nye's concept, Chung et al. (2021) introduce the terms hard and soft power. Unlike hard military power, soft power is a phenomenon that naturally draws people in without the use of force (Chung et al., 2021). The rise of *Hallyu* such as making people who are unfamiliar with Korea want to learn about the culture after encountering Korean media, and the growing popularity of the Korean language are all examples of soft power. Yang (2022) adds that people began to think positively about Korea as a country they want to visit thanks to BTS. Moreover, the band heavily influences a variety of Korean industries, including economics, culture, and art (Yang, 2022). They also presented speeches at the White House and the United Nations (Chung et al., 2021; I. Kim, 2020; Jun-hee Park, 2022).

Previous instances illustrate that popular culture can be powerful despite being intangible. Mertz (1976) defines popular culture as something that “functions both as a reflection of values as well as a means of stabilizing those values” (p. 13). Some media and art reflect or are inspired by reality. However, they do not always capture it fully. Interestingly enough, the notable Korean

popular culture content in each music, film, and drama mentioned above covers various social and socioeconomic issues. One of the social issues that is commonly addressed in popular media is the Korean education system and its impact on students' self-worth. This is a topic that BTS discusses frequently in their earlier music and will be touched on later in this paper. While other singers such as Seotaiji and Boys¹ and NU'EST² touch on this social issue in a few songs, BTS has a greater impact because they are the most globally recognized group. Their acronym stands for *Bangtan Sonyeondan* or Bulletproof Boy Scouts in English. The name Bulletproof Boy Scouts is meant to evoke a bulletproof vest that blocks stereotypes of adolescents (I. Kim, 2020). Before they began to enter global charts in the late 2010s (I. Kim, 2020; tvN D ENT, 2021; Yang, 2022), their earlier music formed their image and identity as a band, establishing their popularity as voices of youth.

Four of BTS' songs analyzed in this paper are "No More Dream," "N.O," "Spine Breaker," and "Silver Spoon," which were released towards the beginning of their career. Both "No More Dream" and "N.O" talk about students' life in the current education system. These two songs address the students and authorities, respectively, about how students should find their real dreams and how the current system is forcing them to conform. "Spine Breaker" and "Silver Spoon" tackle the socioeconomic disparities both in school and after graduation. All of these songs are in different albums, spanning the years of 2013 and 2015. Moreover, they continue to talk about social issues even after 2015. The recurring theme in BTS' songs shows that this issue

¹ Seotaiji and Boys debuted in 1992 (Kil & Ahn, 2019). Although their first two albums are not about social issues, two songs in their last two albums are: "Classroom Idea" in 1994 and "Come Back Home" in 1995 (Kil & Ahn, 2019).

² NU'EST debuted in 2012 (PLEDIS Entertainment, n.d.). They released two songs about social issues in the same year: "FACE" and "Action" (PLEDIS Entertainment, n.d.). After getting popular, the group changed their music style and no longer talked about this theme (Bak, 2021).

is significant to them. Despite the fact that their songs are specific to the Korean context, their themes are universal so that a global audience can still connect in their own way. While it should be kept in mind that not all media depict real life well, this paper will focus on lyrics from four early songs of BTS and observe how well BTS captures the current zeitgeist or cultural climate of contemporary Korean students' and young adults' struggles and hardships.

Who BTS Is and Their Importance

BTS is a band from Korea, who debuted in 2013. As W. Lee and Kao (2021) summarize BTS' countless records, the group constantly broke records and outperformed since they excelled at the Billboard charts in 2020. However, BTS' success did not come easily. Coming from a small, near-bankrupted agency, BTS had to go through unusually more hardships and constantly prove themselves. Their debut was a fluke as the broadcast station needed someone to fill in (BTS, 2017). Since the label was very small and unknown, the agency lacked connections, influence, and finances, and could not provide opportunities to the group. With the lack of resources, BTS had difficulty promoting themselves as they would often get cut off and not get enough air time (BTS, 2017). While other artists also have their own hardships, groups from the big three companies—SM, JYP, and YG Entertainments—get popular relatively quickly after their debut. This is demonstrated by how the vast majority of famous groups are from these three labels (Messerlin & Shin, 2017). BTS in particular received more hate and criticism from various groups of people than other idol groups from the big three companies (BTS, 2022). The band was often told that they would not make it because they were from a small agency (BTS, 2017). In fact, there would not be the BTS that everyone knows today if their song “I NEED U” did not

win first place in Korea's weekly music show back in 2015 (Hyewoon Lee, 2020).³ The typical underdog narrative can be seen in their journey to success. BTS is able to stay humble because they do not forget where they started and all the hardships they underwent, which is one of the reasons their fans, known as BTS ARMY,⁴ like and support them.

As a leading artist of the *Hallyu*, there are numerous studies about BTS and their success. Jieun Jung (2019) analyzes BTS' storytelling strategy by using three elements: story, tell, and interaction. She thoroughly discusses BTS' discography because their albums connect and have a continuous storyline (Jieun Jung, 2019). In the storyline, BTS uses allusion to deepen the meaning of their art (Jieun Jung, 2019). Supporting this, Saeji (2020) introduces the term intertextuality⁵ and how this applies both visually and lyrically in K-pop music videos. This plays a significant role in inspiring the audience to attribute their own meaning to the images in the music video. For example, a visual of a white rabbit wearing clothes, or lyrics describing this, inspires them to reference *Alice in Wonderland* (Saeji, 2020). Hence, the intertextuality helps attract and entertain the audience to make them invest more symbolism and hidden meanings in the music video. Kang and Lee (2019) also highlight the importance of visual content of popular culture's role in the effect on audiences. Jieun Jung's (2019) article demonstrates that BTS'

³ It is impossible to tell if BTS' popularity is caused by their music first or the other way around, since it is like a chicken and egg. There are too many variables that contributed to their success today. The band themselves said that they did not specifically aim abroad, especially in the west (Hyewoon Lee, 2020; tvN D ENT, 2021; Yoo, 2017). Their founder also said he cannot tell which attempt broke through the global market since they underwent countless trials and errors (Yoo, 2017).

⁴ ARMY is an acronym for Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth (I. Kim, 2020; W. Lee & Kao, 2021). Since BTS' Korean name consist the word bulletproof, the fandom name's acronym ARMY also matches the military theme.

⁵ Intertextuality is a term used "to explain relationships between different types of media" (Saeji, 2020, p. 48). In terms of K-pop, "it is designed as a shorthand reference to connect [...] other media" and create a story (Saeji, 2020, p. 48).

storytelling strategy is successful because their story appeals to many people. This draws in a lot of dedicated fans.

Besides storytelling, another element BTS is acclaimed for is their message. The group writes their own songs and their message resonates with a diverse population of young people due to its universal themes (I. Kim, 2020; Yang, 2022). Some of these include but are not limited to mental health, society, consolation, solidarity, identity, criticism, and loving and embracing oneself. Chang (2020) explores how BTS utilizes different artworks to demonstrate the eternal remembering of victims from one of the national tragedies, the Sewol Ferry accident, in their “Spring Day” music video. Although the majority of BTS’ songs are in Korean, fans look up translations and are willing to understand the context beyond just simply enjoying the sound. For example, some songs contain Korean historical references like The Gwangju Massacre (also known as The Gwangju Uprising) in their song “Ma City”; fans learn about them through BTS’ songs (Yang, 2022). Those who are unfamiliar with Korean society and culture can still learn about the country through popular culture. BTS opens the doors to international education about Korea through their work.

Overview of the Modern Education System in Korea

As mentioned previously, part of BTS’ success is their commentary on modern societal issues, particularly the Korean education system and students’ struggles in their early songs. Much like any other country, education is very important in Korea. Korean parents generally are very passionate about furthering their children’s education and will heavily invest all resources, even at a great cost to themselves. While other Asian countries also experience an education

fever, Korea's passion for education is its strong connection to social mobility. Since most parents believe that education is the key to being successful in Korea, Koreans tend to be responsive to issues of inequality in the education system, in terms of academic misconduct (Koo, 2022). However, as sociologist Koo (2022) finds, more and more people have begun to believe that as the financial and psychological demands of education increase, it is becoming another means for the wealthy to distinguish themselves from others and less about allowing for social mobility. Specifically, the competitive nature of the educational system has led people to depend on private institutes, such as cram schools (*hagwon*), over public schools: costing families a substantial amount of resources such as time and money (Koo, 2022). He also writes that parents are eager to ensure their children's academic success so their children can attend one of Korea's elite universities to gain a higher status in the social network (Koo, 2022). Fathers usually provide financial support and mothers, especially those who are housewives, act as managers and coordinate their children's schedules and needs (Koo, 2022). Regardless if one is a parent or a student, everyone involved in the intense competitive education system is suffering and anxious. This paper will examine the impacts of the Korean educational system on self-worth and how the impacts can be observed through BTS' lyrics. The perceptions of self-worth will be shown through news articles, statistics, and cultural analysis of school life in Korea.

BTS' Lyrics Analysis

The Importance of Education and Its Significance to Koreans

Since many of the members were either high school students or recent high school graduates at the time of their debut, BTS writes about students and school life at the beginning of

their career. From their debut album *2 COOL 4 SKOOL*, BTS tells their audience to be true to themselves in the title song called “No More Dream.” Lyrics are translated by this paper’s author with original English lyrics in italics:

Hey, what is your dream? / ... / is your dream just that? / *I wanna big house, big cars & big rings / But I actually dun have any big dreams /* haha, I live a very easy life / no one says anything to me even if I do not dream / everyone thinks the same way as I do / the forgotten childhood that was filled with dreams / do not worry about college because I will go to one even if it is far away / ... / what was the dream you had for yourself / who do you see in the mirror now, *I gotta say / go your own way /* even if you live just for one day / do something / put away your weakness / why don’t you say anything? You said you do not want to study / you are scared of actually quitting school, right? Look, you are already getting ready to go to school / please grow up already, you are all talk and no action with a fragile mentality, *boy / (Stop!)* Ask yourself if you have even tried / ... / it is a lie, *you such a liar / See me see me ya,* you are a hypocrite / why are you constantly telling me to take a different path, worry about yourself / please do not force me / ... / on a *same boring day,* on every repetitive day, / grown-ups and parents embed conventional dreams / number one dream job is.. a government official? / ... / rebel against hell-like society, give your dream a special pardon / ask yourself what your dream *profile* is / become a subject of your suppressed life / ... / you do not know how to live / you do not know how to fly / you do not know how to decide / now you do not even know how to dream anymore / ... / do not hesitate or be indecisive, *wussup! / ... / To all the youngsters without dreams.* (BTS, 2013a)

Since education used to be about gaining an opportunity to move up the social ladder, parents not only invest in their children's education but want them to excel in school. It was a set equation and belief that getting good grades would lead to getting into a good college, then landing a good-paying job, and eventually living a successful life with good fortune (G. S. Hwang, 2016). Even those who were from a low socioeconomic status could still be successful with hard work and effort (G. S. Hwang, 2016). This mentality is reflected in the following proverb: A dragon rises from a small stream (G. S. Hwang, 2016). Although this old system no longer works for everyone, parents are willing to move to and live in an expensive metropolitan district, Gangnam, for the sake of their children's education and the possibility of upward mobility (Koo, 2022). Located inside the capital, Seoul, Gangnam is where elite private education such as *hagwon* and tutoring services exist (Koo, 2022). When Statistics Korea asked, more than half of the students between 13 and 24 years old responded that their primary reason for wanting a bachelor's degree or beyond is to get a good job (Statistics Korea & Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2019). Among the middle and high school students, 25.9% answered that they are studying because it is embarrassing otherwise and 13.1% replied that they will be scolded or punished otherwise (Statistics Korea & Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2019). Though *hagwon* is not mandatory, it is quite common to attend one. Statistics Korea found that about seven out of ten primary and secondary school students have participated in private education (Statistics Korea & Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2019). On average, students spend about six to seven hours at the private academy outside of hours spent at school (Statistics Korea, 2020). Depending on the location, quality, and reputation, these *hagwon* are not easily affordable or accessible. Statistics Korea ascertains that the number of students

attending and the amount of money families spend on *hagwon* per child increases every year (accounting for inflation) (Statistics Korea, 2016, 2018, 2020; Statistics Korea & Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2019). Each high school student involved spent about 599,000 KRW (about 492 to 540 USD) per month in 2019 (Statistics Korea, 2020). It requires an enormous amount of effort and hard work to get one step closer to being the protagonist of a success story, and the dedication of time and financial investment is part of the effort.

The song mentions the importance of college to Korean people. BTS writes, “do not worry about college because I will go to one even if it is far away” (BTS, 2013a). This is significant because most of the top universities in Korea are located in Seoul. This results in a phenomenon where prospective college students want to stay in the capital, known as *in-Seoul*, rather than going to college in a rural area (Choi, 2024; Chun, 2019). However, the narrator in the lyric is willing to go and attend one from afar because the average Korean parents are very concerned and worried about their children’s educational admission. Supposedly if a student is uninterested in studying, then they may be afraid to actually quit due to their parents’ high expectations and the sacrifice they made so far: emotionally, financially, and with time. Furthermore, since the only exemplary myth they are familiar with involves social mobility through education, it is hard to halt the focus on academics completely. This is expressed in the lyrics, “You said you do not want to study / you are scared of actually quitting school, right?” (BTS, 2013a). Students are trapped between the agony of not being able to catch up with courses and their peers and at the state where they cannot give up entirely. It is noted that some curriculum is more advanced in Korea than in other countries (Jeon, 2015). The advanced curriculum adds more stress on the students. Those who are apathetic towards pursuing

education, as well as those who are interested in a certain field of which the parents disapprove, will have conflicts with their parents. The lyrics say, “why are you constantly telling me to take a different path, worry about yourself / please do not force me” (BTS, 2013a). These instances may result in losing their dream and motivation. Even one former English teacher in Seoul recalls what he witnessed in Korean students: “It’s not about finding your own path or your own self as it is about doing better than those around you” (Hu, 2015). The grown-ups, especially parents who disapprove of their children’s dreams, embed a certain dream like “a government official” into their children in the hopes of higher social status through education with good intentions in mind (BTS, 2013a).⁶ However, if everyone has the same dream, they will have the same lifestyle. When the government official position was in high demand for employment due to job security, stable income, and pension, every person had to compete against over 100 applicants in the early 2010s (Cho, 2012; J. Kim, 2022). This increased competitiveness and stress in certain careers over others. Everyone was engrossed in a particular occupation, private academies focused on preparation were established to make profits out of desperate people, the cycle repeats, earnest prospective employees will partake in this endless painful process, and many will become exhausted. Thus, BTS is telling their main audience, the youth, to find the path they want to take instead of listening to others who force different dreams on them as they say in their lyrics: “go your own way / even if you live just for one day / do something / [...] become a subject of your suppressed life” (BTS, 2013a). As BTS urges students to take action

⁶ While this is not unique to Korea, it is addressed by BTS who represent the voices of Korean youth. This connects back to one of the reasons BTS is popular. Despite writing songs that reflect Korean societal experiences, their lyrics and message are universal enough that it resonates with broader populations regardless of age, gender, and nationality.

and ownership of their own lives in this song, they continue to discuss this matter on the next album.

The Cost and Value of a Person's Life and Happiness in Comparison With Academic and Financial Success

In the song "N.O" from the second album *O!RUL8,2?*, BTS criticizes the adults, parents, and society who are responsible for making students lose their dreams and molding them into the system:

A nice house, a nice car, will these bring happiness? / *In Seoul to the SKY*, will my parents really be happy? / Dreams disappeared, I barely have any room to breathe / like running in a circle with only school, home, or internet cafe / with the pressure to come in first place / students are double agents between dream and reality / who made us into studying machines? / Those who distinguish first place from failure / and limit us; it cannot be helped but easily accept the fact that it is the adults [who distinguish and limit us] / if you think about it simply under the law of the jungle / who do you think are the ones who made us step over even our close friends, *what?* / The grown-ups tell me that difficulty is just for now / to hang on a little longer, to do whatever I want later / *Everybody say NO!* / The word 'later' does not work anymore / do not live trapped in other's dreams anymore / ... / it is really now or never / nothing has been done yet / ... / I want to play and eat, and rip my school uniform / *Make money good money*, already have jaundiced view / a bank account filled with uncertainty, my unhappiness exceeds the limit / a studying sigh factory, continuously pay off one debt by taking on another debt

[equivalent idiomatic expression: Robbing Peter to pay Paul] / adults confess that we are living very comfortably, / that we are better off than we deserved; then who am I to feel unhappy? / There is nothing to talk about besides studying / there are kids like me overflowing out there living the same lives as puppets / who the hell will take responsibility? (BTS, 2013b)

SKY from “*In Seoul to the SKY*” is an acronym for the three prestigious universities in Korea: Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University (BTS, 2013b). One of the dramas about college admission and intensive private tutoring is called *SKY Castle*, which references the three big universities, too. The comment students often hear from adults is that the students “are living very comfortably / that [they] are better off than [they] deserved” where all they have to do is study and not worry about working or other problems (BTS, 2013b). Parents also say they only need to endure this momentarily and they can do whatever they desire after college entrance, just as the lyrics say, “The grown-ups tell me that difficulty is just for now / to hang on a little longer, to do whatever I want later” (BTS, 2013b). However, that is not true nowadays as students have to start thinking about their grades, internships, extracurricular activities, studying for English proficiency scores, and obtaining certificates for the job market (Junho Park, 2024). Though the students may have better lives compared to the previous generation materially, they are not happy because they are living someone else’s life and lacking social, emotional, and identity development.

The relationship between parents and children also plays a role in the burdens students feel. Helicopter parents pave the paths for their children so they do not waste any time (M. Kim, 2015). Children under these parents effectively achieve success, do not face failure at all, and are

often indecisive (Chun, 2019; M. Kim, 2015). While helicopter parents are everywhere, the phenomenon in Korea is more serious. Korean helicopter parents micromanage their children (Chun, 2019; M. Kim, 2015). They even meddle in every small and big life event of their children, to the point where young adults ask their parents what they need to do next and cannot do anything on their own (Chun, 2019; M. Kim, 2015). As mentioned earlier, parents, especially mothers, made enormous amounts of sacrifice and investment in raising, caring for, and supporting their children. Unless the parents and children are on bad terms or the parents neglect their children in any way, Korean children may feel like they are in debt to their parents. Simultaneously, parents often think of children as extensions of themselves and possessions. While conducting fieldwork in *Twisongdwi*, a community-based village in Korea, Janelli and Janelli (1982) partially agree with a Korean educational psychologist who claims that:

Korean children maintain a strong sense of dependence on parents throughout adolescence and later life. Unlike children in most Western societies, Korean children never develop a strong sense of independence or personal identity; instead, [...] they view themselves primarily as extensions of their parents. (pp. 35-36)

Contrary to their statement, it is actually the parents who view and treat children as their extensions, not the other way around. Although children may have other thoughts, these mentalities, along with guilt and wanting to avoid conflict, pressure them to follow their parents' demands and intertwine with the Confucian values of submitting to one's parents. With the lack of freedom and sense of independence provided in the first place, it is more reasonable to argue that Korean youth did not have much choice to begin with under these controlled environments. The side effect of this manifests in school life.

Meanwhile, students are in anguish from endless stress and competition. According to Statistics Korea, 51.8% of the youth ages 13 to 24 experienced stress from school life in 2018 (Statistics Korea & Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2019). 47.3% of adolescents between 13 and 18 and 14.9% of young adults ages 19 to 24 worried about studying, specifically grades and aptitude (Statistics Korea & Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2019). In this sense, the environment is “the law of the jungle” as mentioned in the song, where only those who can endure the distress, “step over [their peers and] even [their] close friends,” and excel in school can survive (BTS, 2013b). “[T]he law of the jungle” system and intense competitiveness do not ease the stress students are experiencing.

Many students and their families are highly invested in the scores, which causes fewer and fewer people to value good character. High levels of stress, “the law of the jungle” system, and a lack of investment in creating good characters may be factors in severe levels of bullying. Two of the main reasons students feel depressed and thought of harming themselves were because of their grades and school bullying (Shin, 2018). The most common cause of death for youth between nine and 24 years old was intentional self-harm or suicide (Statistics Korea & Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2019). This has been the most common cause among the youth since 2007 (Statistics Korea & Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2019). In 2018, about one out of three middle and high schoolers experienced depressive moods (Statistics Korea & Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2019). Although it should be noted that it is uncertain if school bullying and academic distress caused all of these statistics, it certainly takes up a large portion of the percentage as everyone is invested in students’ academic success.

This song contains negative themes such as “pressure,” confinement, and “unhappiness” (BTS, 2013b). Students feel suffocated because all of their school curriculum gears toward the Korean college entrance exam, known as CSAT or *suneung*. Unlike in the United States, *suneung* is only offered once a year. Just by a few points, the rank of college they can be accepted into differs. Those who are not satisfied with their test results or the school they got accepted to will spend another year studying and retaking *suneung* the following year. This is very common to the point that there are terms such as *jaesu*, those who are studying and retaking *suneung* for the second time the following year, and *samsu*, those who are doing it for another year—in a total of three years—and so on. The same phenomenon emerges when people study for government official positions. There are *hagwon* for people who are planning to retake any sort of examination. The previous two songs mention materialistic, tangible wealth, and question if those will bring happiness. While it sure would be nice to own the luxuries, they should not be worth more than people’s health, well-being, happiness, and lives.

The Gap Between the Rich and the Poor in School Beyond Academic Learning

In the last trilogy of the school series, *Skool Luv Affair*, the setting for “*Deunggol Beureikeo*” or “Spine Breaker” still takes place at school but discusses the socioeconomic polarization among the students:

Hundreds of dollars worth of shoes, thousands of dollars worth of padded jackets, / and
 hundreds of dollars worth of watches are being needlessly shown off for nothing / both
 the education and students go to the mountains [equivalent idiomatic expression: too
 many cooks spoil the broth] / classes are split exactly in two halves in the 21st century /

the haves and the have-nots / those who wear shoes and have-nots / those who wear outfits and those who undress / and those who make every effort to get / what is going on? Are you falling behind the trend? / You got them by badgering and going out of your way, don't you feel guilty? / Your greed grows like the padding, fully stuffed / cold-hearted even when you see your parents' spine bent / they cannot help but buy you one because you pester them about all of your friends having it / (*Ayo baby*) do not act like a spoiled brat / you will not freeze to death for not wearing that padded jacket / before stuffing your padded jacket with goose down / fill your head with common sense before it is too late / ... / that will make your mind uneasy, *dirty clothes* / ... / you are the spine breaker / ... / your parents' spine breaker / ... / you will regret it one day / ... / (*But I say*), what am I supposed to do when I really want to have one / even friends from poor families possess it / (*And I say*), I do not have any other option but to buy one to not be ostracized. (BTS, 2014)

The term *deunggol beureikeo* or “spine breaker” appears in Korean media, describing the shape of parents' spines being bent from working hard manual labor to support their household, particularly the purchasing of expensive commodities (BTS, 2014). The affluent middle and upper class in Korea consume luxury items from overseas deemed distinguished goods or *myongpoom* in order to demonstrate their affluence and differentiate themselves from the ordinary people (Koo, 2022). To replicate the well-to-do's consumption, other people who are unable to buy *myongpoom* begin to buy counterfeit items to impersonate the well-off (Koo, 2022). The same phenomenon occurs in schools. From the surface level, it may appear that there is no socioeconomic discrimination between the students because every student wears a uniform.

However, different class and family backgrounds are still noticeable as students bring other visible, materialistic items to school. These products include cell phones, watches, and—most evident—padded jackets (Pyo, 2021). The difference in students’ socioeconomic status becomes apparent over time⁷ as they bring these items to class.

The “haves” or upper-socioeconomic class could easily get a hold of expensive and exclusive brand products (BTS, 2014). These are the same group of families who can afford costly and extravagant private tutoring. On the other hand, the “have-nots” or lower-socioeconomic group who experience a sense of deprivation will do everything they can to get the items in order to not fall behind, be left out, or be targeted by others (BTS, 2014). If a group of students cannot obtain the object that the rest of the classmates have, they may feel like they do not live up to their peers’ level. Desperately not wanting to fall “behind the trend” or become a victim of bullying, the consumption of luxury brands is similar to another competition for students to survive in a confined place: school (BTS, 2014). Just as BTS says, “both the education and students go to the mountains,” the school has become an environment to endure the smaller scope of the “law of the jungle” instead of being a place for scholarly development and a collaborative environment (BTS, 2014).

Endless Socioeconomic Inequality and Injustice After Education

The song “*Baepsae*” or “Silver Spoon” from one of the youth album series called *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life Part 2* voices the socioeconomic inequality and injustice the youth face in Korea:

⁷ Korean students are usually assigned a class and stay with the same group of people throughout the whole academic year unlike in the United States.

*They call me crow-tit [the bird *baepsae*'s scientific name is vinous-throated parrotbill] / this generation is suffering hardships / quickly chase 'em / my legs are swollen thanks to the storks / ... / my teachers who are born as gold spoons / there is passion pay at the part-time job / there are teachers at school / malicious superiors at work / media talks about n-po generation every day / change rules, *change change* / but storks want to *maintain* [the rules] / that will not do, *BANG BANG* / this is not normal / ... / ah, stop talking about effort this and effort that over and over / ah, it makes my hands and feet cringe / ... / ah, there is a slim chance of success / as expected of storks! / ... / (as expected of storks), you do not disappoint us / (as expected of storks), you live up to your name / (as expected of storks), go have it all / ... / I have crow-tit's legs, you have stork's legs / they say, 'My legs are worth one million dollars' / how can we compete in the same game when my legs are short? / *They say*, 'It is fine if it is the same plain field!' / *Never Never Never* / ... / you are kidding saying that it is my fault, right? / What do you mean this is fair? *oh are you crazy* / what do you mean this is justice? *you mu be kiddin' me!* / ... / (we are crow-tits), we do not disappoint / (we are crow-tits), we live up to our names / (we are crow-tits), let's live together. (BTS, 2015)*

There is a proverb "If a crow-tit tries to walk like a stork, it will break its legs" in Korea. This expression is equivalent to "Tailor your ambitions to the measure of your abilities" or "You may ruin yourself by trying to ape your betters" in English. The proverb implies that people should not mind others and pursue their own dreams and goals they hope to achieve, and not feel relative deprivation by comparing with others or being someone else. However, BTS uses the exact proverb to convey the unfairness the youth is experiencing in today's society. People with

disadvantages do not stand a chance against those with more advantaged backgrounds nowadays. They should not be competing on the same field under the same conditions, referencing the part of the lyrics “ah, there is a slim chance of success / [...] I have crow-tit’s legs, you have stork’s legs / [...] how can we compete in the same game when my legs are short?” (BTS, 2015). This is not the true equality nor the justice people are demanding. A similar mentality is mirrored in the analogy applied in the spoon theory. Spoon theory is a recent concept where the ranking order from top to bottom is platinum, diamond, gold, silver, bronze, and dirt correlates to one’s socioeconomic background (Junghoon Jung, 2016). As previously explained in the first song “No More Dream” analysis, there were hopes for upward social mobility in the past. However, that is no longer the case, as Korean people’s perceptions of this social mobility changed to be less hopeful according to numerous news articles (K. Kim, 2015; Hae-rin Lee, 2021; K. Lee, 2019). Thus, the logic of hard work paying off later and the word “effort” in this “Silver Spoon” lyrics fails, marking a wider gap between the older and younger generations (BTS, 2015). A lot of the issues experienced in school go beyond the school setting and into the culture.

In the work field, the term *yeoljeong pei*, which is translated as “passion pay,” is an ongoing social topic (BTS, 2015). Companies hire inexperienced workers and pay below minimum wage or do not pay at all in exchange for providing opportunities to gain experience in the field people are passionate about (*Youth Who Are Angry at ‘Passion Pay,’* 2014). A similar term called *jaeneung gibu*, or talent donation, exists as well. One should be praised if they are willing to donate their talent of their own will, but it becomes an exploitation of labor if others request to donate the labor free of cost. This *jaeneung gibu* and *yeoljeong pei* were in a headline recently when one of the popular actresses asked if any of her fans were willing to donate their

talent and translate her vlog videos on YouTube (Yeo, 2023). The controversy arose not only because someone else asked for free labor, but because the project requires professional skills and long hours of dedication (Yeo, 2023). This made the public accuse her of exploiting and devaluing labor (Yeo, 2023). With the prevalent mindset of authorities and the older generation not wanting to pay fair wages to reduce costs, it is difficult for the youth to protect their rights. The powerless crow-tit does not stand a chance against the powerful stork, which results in injustice and unfairness. The rich become richer while the poor become poorer. The people, especially the younger generation, demand change but authorities and wealthy people, “storks[,] want to *maintain*” their power and comfortable lifestyle (BTS, 2015). With the social ladder and upward mobility no longer achievable solely based on one’s “effort,” young people lose their hopes and dreams.

Feeling defeated, the youth has literally become an *n-po sedae* or a ‘giving-up generation.’ This is a generation that gives up their rights to numerous things. Initially, the youth gave up three things: dating, marriage, and having children (J. Hwang, 2023; Junghoon Jung, 2016). This is seen in the rapidly decreasing birth rate in the country; the birth rate is below 0.85 in Korea (J. Hwang, 2023). The list constantly expands/is expanding and now includes landing a job, owning a house, maintaining human relationships, and hope (J. Hwang, 2023; Junghoon Jung, 2016). When the youth who worked so hard to excel in school, obtain various certifications, and achieve high proficiency exam scores to get a job, they now have to work long hours at a company that may not treat them well. Korea is known to have long working hours (Chen et al., 2023; J. Hwang, 2023). Being burned out from the constant competition and the pressure to always do something productively, people feel depressed and defeated by the system.

BTS addresses the socioeconomic issues and how the younger generation feels in this song. By expressing the state of the youth today to the public, they are calling for a change. It is not the younger generation who needs to put more “effort.” Rather, it is the older generation and the system that needs to change instead of maintaining the old method that no longer works and saying “effort this and effort that” to the youth (BTS, 2015).

Conclusion

BTS is known globally for writing and producing their own music, for their storytelling, for their message, and for having a massive, dedicated fan base. While BTS has collaborated with other international singers and has a few English songs, the vast majority of their songs are in Korean and contain Korean cultural elements. Although they have many international fans who may be unfamiliar with Korean culture, the fans who resonate with BTS’ message become interested in and begin to learn about the country through popular culture. By analyzing four early songs of BTS—“No More Dream,” “N.O,” “Spine Breaker,” and “Silver Spoon”—this paper was able to observe the social conflicts and struggles youth have in contemporary Korea.

BTS advises their listeners to face themselves by finding their true desire if they are uninterested in academics or have been told to pursue a different field in the first song, “No More Dream.” In “N.O,” the band denounces the adults, society, and the system for molding young adults to be someone else without allowing them to find their individual path. Despite living a better life materially in contrast to the older generation, students are unhappy as they encounter other side effects of the competitive educational system due to stress and the high value of academic achievements. BTS calls for change in their next two songs. The youth experiences

socioeconomic polarization between their peers in school in “Spine Breaker.” The mindset of wanting to distinguish themselves and the fear of not wanting to be left out or be the target of bullying adds another layer of competition and changes the purpose of school. In the final song, “Silver Spoon,” the group expresses additional socioeconomic inequalities and injustices the young adults confront after education. Based on the statistics and information provided by the Korean government and other research, it can be concluded that BTS represents the reality of the current society’s status well.

There are studies on BTS, but they are usually limited to tourism, economics, art, culture, language, and communication fields. While this paper successfully demonstrates that K-pop sensation BTS’ songs accurately depict contemporary Korean youth’s hardships and the process by which international fans learn Korean culture through popular culture, specifically K-pop songs, there is a limitation in this research: A specific range of data sets is used in this paper to highlight the statistics on *hagwon* expenses, stress, and death. Although Statistics Korea has reports from more recent years, the ones that were created regarding 2019 are mainly used for this paper. This is because deaths caused by the COVID-19 pandemic were added to statistics at the beginning of 2020. In order to be consistent with the data and a controlled setting, the research restricts the data to that collected in 2019 and before. Another shortcoming is that while data provided by Statistics Korea aids in grasping the whole picture, data concerning the actual cause of high suicide or death by self-harm in youth is lacking. Possibly conducting a quantitative questionnaire directly related to the research would be beneficial in capturing the actual feelings and perceptions in contemporary Korean society. Since statistics that contain COVID-19-related data are explicitly excluded in this paper, continuing research may observe

how the pandemic might have affected the students in school in various areas like academic performances, involvement in *hagwon*, bullying, wider polarization between the students, and accessing opportunities. Besides how the COVID-19 pandemic impacts the result, a continuing study on BTS is needed considering that the group will make a comeback in 2025 after all members complete their mandatory military service. Seeing as BTS writes their own lyrics, has an evolving storyline, and talks about various topics and issues, talking about these other social conflicts and problems as well as some positive outlooks will stimulate more diverse conversations about BTS in different disciplines. A few songs on modern social issues in Korea that were considered for this paper but were not included are “Ugh!,” “Am I Wrong,” “Spring Day,” and so on. Not just the lyrics or music videos with historical or cultural references, but other events related to BTS such as Korea’s diplomatic relation with Japan or mandatory military service will also help academia expand knowledge on the impact of Korean popular culture.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor ChangHwan Kim and my defense committee for offering valuable feedback on my draft. My gratitude extends to the KU Writing Center for helping me throughout the multiple steps in my paper. Special thanks to my friends for supporting me.

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